TENANT PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT IN A DIGITALISING SOCIETY

SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN THE SOCIAL HOUSING SECTOR

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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 5

1. INTRODUCTION 9
   1.1 WHAT IS TENANT PARTICIPATION? 9
   1.2 HOW IS TENANT PARTICIPATION BECOMING DIGITAL? 10
   1.3 RESEARCHING THE COMMUNITY HOUSING SECTOR IN NEW SOUTH WALES 11
   1.4 REPORT STRUCTURE 11

2. METHODS 13
   2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW 13
   2.2 DIGITAL AUDIT 14
   2.3 QUALITATIVE METHODS 14
   2.5 APPROACH TO ANALYSIS 15

3. GETTING STARTED WITH SOCIAL MEDIA 17
   3.1 BECOMING ‘SOCIAL’ WITH TENANTS? 17
   3.2 STARTING SLOWLY WITH LIMITED RESOURCES 18
   3.3 SOCIAL MEDIA FOR TENANT PARTICIPATION 20
   3.4 SOCIAL MEDIA FOR ADVOCACY 21
   3.5 SOCIAL MEDIA FOR MARKETING 22

4. GOING DIGITAL AND STAYING ‘TRADITIONAL’ 24
   4.1 ACKNOWLEDGING DIGITAL INEQUALITIES 24
   4.2 BEYOND A ‘ONE SIZE FITS ALL’ APPROACH 26
   4.3 MOBILE PHONES AND THE ACCESSIBILITY OF TEXT BASED COMMUNICATION 27
   4.4 CARING PRACTICES THROUGH PANDEMIC CONDITIONS 28
   4.5 BACK TO BASICS 29

5. CONCLUSIONS 32
   5.1 MAIN FINDINGS 32
   5.2 PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS 34
   5.3 RESEARCH PRIORITIES AND NEXT STEPS 35

REFERENCES 37

APPENDICES 41
   APPENDIX A: LITERATURE THAT REFERS TO DIGITAL APPROACHES FOR TENANT PARTICIPATION 41
   APPENDIX B: KEY SEARCH TERMS FOR LITERATURE REVIEW 42
   APPENDIX C: 2015 INTERVIEW SCHEDULE 43W
   APPENDIX D: 2021 FOCUS GROUP SCHEDULE 44
Hey, what's up?

Sure, let's see new episode. It was released yesterday and on streaming.

Ok, let's meet around 18 pm.

Sounds great. See u later.

Enter Message

Send
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Society is becoming digital and so too are social housing providers. The digitalisation of housing organisations in Australia is occurring alongside a deepening national housing crisis and rising inequality, which has increasingly been revealed and exacerbated by the impacts of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Digital technologies and systems are bound up with those crises, sometimes helping, sometimes making things worse. There is a need for sector-wide research to examine the use of digital technologies and social media within social housing, especially for tenant participation and engagement purposes, and to better understand how digital technologies are shaping the relationship between tenants and housing organisations.

This project focuses on tenant participation and engagement in a digitalising society. Tenant participation is about the practices and processes that enable tenants to have influence over decisions that impact their own housing. It can support tenancies, building safety, social inclusion and community ties, as well as create opportunities for work, employment, citizenship and health. We explore how emerging digital practices present both opportunities and challenges for housing providers as well as for tenant participation.

Central to our project is the desire to support and inspire social housing practitioners and organisations to embrace new digital practices in ways that strengthen tenants’ influence in the decisions made about their own housing. A practical resource for the social housing sector, we identify how digital channels can support: (1) tenant participation and engagement practices as well as the relationships between tenants and social landlords; and (2) the sector in campaigning and advocating with their tenants and local communities for a more just housing system.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

We developed a multi-method study to examine how social housing organisations use the web and social media for tenant participation and engagement in the social housing sector in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. The datasets were generated in 2015 and 2021, which enabled us to identify changes in social media use in the sector over time. Although we focused on tenant participation, social media and digital platforms are often used for multiple purposes and to reach and engage with a range of different stakeholder groups and audiences. Our research captured
these diverse uses of social media for the marketing, fundraising, and advocacy work of the social housing sector. We therefore also report on social media use beyond tenant participation, and consider how the multiple forms of communication overlap and interact in digital spaces.

The research design comprises three components: 1) a narrative literature review to identify the international evidence base on the use of social media and new communication channels for tenant participation in the social housing sector; 2) two digital audits of social housing providers’ web and social media use; and 3) qualitative interviews and focus groups with 26 representatives from the social housing sector.

**MAIN FINDINGS**

In our first analysis chapter *Getting Started with Social Media* (Chapter 3), the two digital audits show how housing organisations have changed the way they use social media over the six-year study period. The data has been analysed to produce insights into the different uses of these platforms as well as how social housing providers get started with social media, and negotiate the tensions that social media use creates for their organisations.

Our digital audits show that there has been an increase in uptake of social media accounts. A majority of Community Housing Providers (CHPs) in New South Wales (NSW) now have Facebook but use of other platforms such as Twitter and Instagram (while growing) is still in the minority. Facebook is often a first choice for housing providers for engaging with tenants. However it is often used as a one-way broadcast mechanism, and there are missed opportunities for ‘two-way’ conversations. Twitter is the key site for the sector and the platform of choice for CEOs and housing leaders agitating for change. We found that tenants are not visibly present in these online spaces on Twitter and that opportunities for tenant participation in these spaces for housing advocacy and housing justice could be further pursued.

One of the main reasons that housing organisations use social media is for housing advocacy. Housing organisations have an important role to play in advocating for tenants, as well as addressing the stigmatisation of social housing. Housing organisations are able to join together in social media spaces for advocacy in ways that were not always possible through mainstream media or ‘traditional’ channels.

Digital inequalities experienced by some tenants are a barrier for digital forms of tenant participation and engagement. Venturing onto social media platforms for tenant participation is often done at a slow pace as it takes time to negotiate strategies and approaches. Starting slowly is also necessary given the potential to exclude tenants experiencing digital inequalities in terms of access and skills. A lack of resources also impacts social media uptake as a significant amount of ‘behind the scenes’ work is generated before something even makes it to a social media page as content.

In our second analysis chapter *Going Digital But Staying Traditional* (Chapter 4), our research found that there are a growing number of ways in which tenants and their social landlords interact and an increasingly complex set of communication practices. We locate our analyses of digital inequalities within data from the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII), which tracks and reports on digital inclusion in Australia. Our qualitative data emphasises how a mix of both digital and traditional channels are needed because tenants have different communication needs and preferences. Some organisations have blanket approaches to information sharing, which means that every tenant gets the same information in the same way. Knowing tenant preferences is critical for effective tenant participation, particularly as digital inequalities impact engagement needs in relation to the access, affordability, and digital capabilities of tenants. As many tenants are ‘mobile-only users’, participants emphasised the effectiveness of text-based forms of communication (i.e. SMS and email) for interacting with tenants. Societal expectations are also shifting around reply times and responsiveness, which are moving towards more instantaneous, real-time formats.

The COVID-19 pandemic emphasised the value and importance of networked communities. Our research found that, in some circumstances, the pandemic created the necessary conditions for digital tenant engagement and some housing organisations went online with their tenants quickly. For other providers, they did not need to, or were not able to transition participation practices to digital spaces. Phone call
welfare checks increased during the pandemic and received positive responses, which represents more ‘traditional’ forms of communication and the value of continuing with, or returning to, some long standing traditional communicative practices. Our focus group participants acknowledged the critical role in care that social housing organisations need to provide especially in times of crisis.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Arising from the main findings are some implications for practice for housing organisations to consider. Given the range and diversity of housing settings, as well as tenant groups and communities, what is particularly relevant for one setting may be less so in another. Each housing organisation will be able to consider the relevance of each ‘implication for practice’ to their own specific setting and particular set of circumstances.

- **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 1**: Dedicated specialist resources are required to make social media and build online communities and relationships with tenants.

- **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 2**: Long standing power imbalances between organisations and tenants are being reproduced and potentially amplified within social media spaces.

- **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 3**: Critical and negative feedback and comments are likely within digital spaces that facilitate dialogue and two-way interactions.

- **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 4**: Digital forms of housing advocacy are often being carried out for and not with tenants.

- **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 5**: Marketing, advocacy and tenant engagement and participation practices in online spaces can overlap and cause tension.

- **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 6**: Digital inequalities around access, affordability and digital capabilities impact the lives of many people living in social housing (including the tenant participation strategies and practices of housing organisations).

- **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 7**: Housing organisations are increasingly using a larger and more complex set of communication practices to reach a greater diversity of tenants with tailored information.

- **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 8**: SMS and email messaging systems are increasingly important and effective forms of communication for housing organisations.

- **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 9**: In the contexts of crises such as the pandemic, housing organisations have needed to adapt their communications in a timely manner.

- **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 10**: The pandemic context reaffirms the need for communicating in ways that care for tenants.

- **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 11**: Face-to-face encounters within communities and neighbours remain highly valued. Opportunities for connection and community are important for tenants.

RESEARCH PRIORITIES AND NEXT STEPS

Our report culminates in four proposed directions for further research in this field. Given the scarcity of research on the use of social media and digital technologies within the social housing sector, particularly, how the impacts of digitalisation on tenant participation and engagement practices, more research into effective practices, with a focus on the diverse needs of differing local contexts and settings, would be beneficial for both providers and tenants.

1. **The practices of ‘tenant participation’ to be re-worked to strengthen tenant influence over decisions that impact their own housing**

Despite a shift to digital participation, tenant participation practices more broadly are limited in the Australian context. We call for tenant participation to be conceptually reworked so that it becomes positioned more prominently in the everyday practices of housing organisations, and the intent of tenant participation practices are communicated more broadly to key groups and communities. Instances of where tenants are leading and in control of tenant participation practices were rare within our research. Reconceptualising tenant participation allows for the elevation of the tenants as actors within the production of their own housing.
2. Research to identify and support best practice approaches for using social media and other digital technologies to promote tenant participation

Our report highlights how the use of social media and digital technologies for tenant participation and engagement is an under-researched field. Our literature search only identified fourteen papers internationally on this topic. There is a diversity of housing providers operating in very different contexts, and the way that organisations use and approach social media and digital forms of communication needs to reflect the needs of their tenant groups and settings.

3. Research into tenant perspectives and experiences with social media and digital practices for tenant participation and engagement

Our report contains the perspectives of social housing practitioners working within housing organisations. Research with tenants about tenant participation and housing advocacy is essential to understand how social media and digital communications might work in ways that serve the best interests of tenants. There are opportunities for tenants to control and manage digital spaces that are co-created by tenants and housing providers. Research into how such approaches may be most effective is required.

4. Housing organisations to further develop programs that address digital inequalities and pursue equitable technologies with tenants

Our research highlights the impacts of digital inequalities for social housing residents and we call for policies and programs that pursue equitable technologies. Consistent with the broader research on digital exclusion, our research also finds that many tenants experience social, economic and spatial barriers in accessing and affording the devices, infrastructures, networks, and spaces that are necessary to participate fully in a digitalising society. This impacts on the possibilities of digital participation for many tenants who may be left out of the potential benefits of new and emerging practices.
1. INTRODUCTION

This project focuses on tenant participation and engagement in a digitalising society. It aims to support and inspire social housing practitioners and organisations to embrace new digital practices in ways that strengthen tenants’ influence in decisions about their own housing. A practical resource for the social housing sector, we identify how digital channels can support: (1) tenant participation and engagement practices as well as the relationships between tenants and social landlords; and (2) the sector in campaigning and advocating with their tenants and local communities for a more just housing system.

Ultimately, our research is concerned with how different social media agendas impact on tenant participation and engagement. This reflects how social media and digital platforms are often used for multiple purposes to reach and engage with a range of different stakeholder groups and audiences. As such, our research examines social media use for tenant participation as well as other purposes such as the marketing, fundraising, and the advocacy work of the social housing sector.

This research has been carried out over a six year period in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, with social media usage and practitioner reflections and experiences gathered in 2015, and again in 2021. Our approach has therefore generated longitudinal insights into the housing sector’s journey with social media and new communication channels for participation, engagement, advocacy, and networking more broadly. Furthermore, our report provides indications as to where the sector might be going with digital communications and highlights implications for tenant participation practices that are grounded in data and the international literature and evidence on this subject.

1.1 WHAT IS TENANT PARTICIPATION?

International research from the UK finds that there is no single accepted definition of tenant participation (Preece, 2019). While tenant participation is widely accepted as a ‘universally good thing’ (Riseborough, 1998 p. 221 cited in McKee and Cooper, 2008, p.133) it has also been described as ‘contested and confused territory’ (Stirling, 2019, p.1). There are a variety of labels in use alongside ‘tenant participation’ such as ‘tenant engagement’, ‘resident empowerment’ and ‘customer engagement’ for example. Tenant participation and its associated terms are really a ‘catch-all label for a range of different forms and processes’ (McKee and Cooper, 2008, p.133). What tenant participation means and how it is practised varies widely across different countries as well as across and within different housing organisations (Preece, 2019; Stirling, 2019). Research on how these practices support tenancies and social inclusion, as well as how tenant participation connects with broader housing (and other) outcomes, is scarce.

In Australia, Community Housing Providers (CHPs) are required by the National Regulatory System for Community Housing (NRSCH)¹ to demonstrate ‘supporting tenant and resident engagement’ (Performance Outcome Id; NRSCH, 2020). This is to be achieved through 1) involving tenants and residents in the planning and delivery of housing services in a variety of accessible ways, 2) promoting appropriate

¹Australian Community Housing Providers (CHPs) must be registered under the National Regulatory System for Community Housing (NRSCH) in one of three Tiers of registration depending on the scale and level of risk of the organisation. This process is overseen by Registrars in each state and territory. The NRSCH National Regulatory Code sets out the performance requirements that registered housing providers must comply with under the National Law.
opportunities for tenants and residents to be involved in their community, 3) obtaining feedback from tenants and residents on its services, and consulting with them on proposals that will affect them (NRSCH, 2020). The NRSCH requires that all Community Housing Organisations (CHPs) have tenant and resident engagement policies, procedures or strategy where there has been a significant change (NRSCH, 2020) and CHPs are also required to evidence their tenant participation practices (NRSCH, 2020). Under the Regulatory Code, CHPs are also required to demonstrate evidence against Performance Outcome 3 of the National Regulatory Code where CHPs are expected to work in partnership with relevant organisations to promote community housing and to contribute to socially inclusive communities (NRSCH, 2019). Further, providers are required to demonstrate they work with partner organisations ‘to maximise positive economic and social outcomes for tenants and the community through social inclusion’ (NRSCH, 2019 p.1).

Despite the regulatory requirement for tenant participation to be carried out in Australia, these practices are under-researched and perhaps taken for granted. In Australia, the extent of tenant participation has remained generally low, except in the case of certain estate renewal projects’ (Pawson & Pinnegar 2018 cited in Pawson, 2019, p.103). Even in estate redevelopment projects where tenant participation and community engagement programmes are more common, the processes can often be designed in ways that deny power and reduce tenants’ influence on their housing outcomes (Darcy & Rogers, 2014).

Economic, social and community-oriented goals can be realised through tenant-focused engagement practices. Bliss and Lambert (2016) argue that ‘at a time when landlords are considering how to reduce costs, bringing tenants closer to landlords through tenant involvement can make a landlord more effective...investing in tenant involvement can produce financial, service, social and community benefits’ (p.3). Many organisations are taking an active role in supporting tenants, which can also involve working closely with third party organisations to support people who are made vulnerable by society (Clarke, Cheshire & Parsell, 2020). Arguably, the differing mission and vision of organisations reflect a diverse housing sector, where some organisations are more corporatised while others are community-based, and this in turn is tied to the shape and variety of tenant participation and engagement practices in use.

1.2 HOW IS TENANT PARTICIPATION BECOMING DIGITAL?

“Many [housing] organisations are embracing channel shift, alternative ways to engage and communicate with residents. With technology evolving at a rapid pace many traditional ‘in person’ involvement activities are moving to online activities through a digital approach” (Flynn, 2019, p. 27).

Like all aspects of social life, tenant participation is being reworked by the ubiquity and imbrication of digital technologies, systems, and devices. The widespread use of social media and other digital platforms is creating new possibilities and challenges for social landlords and tenants to interact with one another (Flynn, 2019). A recent evidence review on tenant participation identifies that, “…whilst there is some evidence that some organisations are moving towards digital approaches to tenant participation, including the use of apps and social media (Family Mosaic, 2015), there is little robust or sector-wide research into technologies of participation (Marsh, 2018)” (cited in Preece, 2019, p.28).

Internationally, ‘technologies of participation’ as it applies to social housing is an under-researched field. There is a need for sector-wide research to examine the use of digital technologies and social media within social housing, especially for tenant participation purposes, and to better understand how digital technologies are shaping the relationship between tenants and housing organisations.

Social media platforms in particular, are increasingly important contexts within which social housing agendas are being negotiated. These digital spaces present possibilities where tenants might hold housing organisations and their corporate partners to account for the buildings, services, and neighbourhoods they provide. Given the ‘context collapse’ (Marwick & boyd, 2011) of multiple audiences or communities folded together in the same digital spaces, how social housing organisations take up social media reveals who and what matters within the social housing sector and more broadly, within society. Social media and new communication channels can broaden and deepen the social ties and networks within and between communities, and allow for the resources embedded in these networks (both tangible and intangible) to be accessed and distributed to shape the lives of tenants in ways that meet their housing needs.

Tenants are using social media to meet their own needs too. A key example is a tenant-led swapping property initiative to enable tenants to move by finding other tenants to swap
properties with. This is an example of social media affording tenants the ability to organise, and generate greater mobilities and choice by circumventing unamenable administrative systems (Dufty Jones, 2012). It indicates that tenants’ needs for greater mobility are not being met within the current system and social media creates possibilities to address those needs on their own terms.

Digital technologies complicate already existing understandings of tenant participation, and also offer new opportunities and challenges. When tenant participation goes digital, what are the implications for social landlords and tenants? How are social housing organisations using social media and digital technologies to engage with their tenants? How do new digital communication platforms and practices enable or constrain the responsibilities placed on tenants? Are digital practices creating opportunities for community building and care?

1.3 RESEARCHING THE COMMUNITY HOUSING SECTOR IN NEW SOUTH WALES

This research has been carried out in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. In 2019–20, just over 800,000 Australians lived in social housing in over 436,000 dwellings across the country (ABS, 2021). There are four different types of social housing in Australia: Public Housing; State Owned and Managed Indigenous Community Housing (SOMIH); Community Housing and Indigenous Community Housing. Although our research is primarily focused on the Community Housing sector in NSW, the research findings are relevant across all social housing forms locally, and findings will also be of interest internationally.

The community housing sector in NSW is a growing one. It has increased substantially in recent years from 25,844 households (as at 30 June, 2012) to 47,536 households (as at 30 June, 2021) (RoGS, 2022). By comparison, there were 93,131 households in public housing (RoGS, 2022) (as at 30 June, 2021). Much of the growth in community housing can be attributed to the transfer of housing dwellings from public to community housing; for example there were large transfers recently in 2018-19 and 2019-20 (8,869 and 4,549 respectively) (RoGS, 2022).

A large proportion of new housing allocations within the community housing sector are provided to people who are in greatest need (AIHW, 2022). The number of high priority applicants being allocated new tenancies in community housing has increased from 41% to 60% over a six-year period to 2020-2021 (Pawson & Lilley 2022). A policy concentration on ‘neediness’ within a residualised social housing sector with scarce housing resources means that providers are housing a growing population of vulnerable households (Clarke, Cheshire, Parsell & Morris, 2022). The changing profile of who resides in community housing has implications for how housing organisations plan and carry out their practices of tenant participation and engagement.

1.4 REPORT STRUCTURE

This report is structured as follows:

- **CHAPTER 2** provides an overview of the methods and data generated and analysed within this research project.
- **CHAPTER 3** focuses on the use of social media platforms by social housing organisations for tenant participation purposes. Our research shows how social media use by housing organisations has changed over the six year study period. Our qualitative data explains how social media platforms are used and provide insights into how social housing providers get started with social media, as well as how they negotiate the tensions that social media use creates for their organisations.
- **CHAPTER 4** Outlines how digital channels of communication are being increasingly introduced by housing organisations, while ‘traditional’ channels are also being maintained. We use data from the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) to understand the digital inequalities reported by housing practitioners in terms of access, affordability, and digital capabilities of tenants. As many tenants are ‘mobile-only users’, the effectiveness of text-based (SMS and email) communication is outlined. Our research also shows how the pandemic has, to an extent, clarified the value and importance of networked communities.
- **CHAPTER 5** concludes the report with a summary of the research findings and identifies four key research priorities and next steps.

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1Greatest need applies if any household members are 1) experiencing homelessness, or 2) at risk of homelessness, including: their life or safety is threatened within existing accommodation; a health condition is exacerbated by existing accommodation; their existing accommodation is inappropriate to their needs; and/or they are experiencing very high rental costs (AIHW, 2022).

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Western Sydney University | 11
2. METHODS

This chapter provides an overview of the methods used and data generated within this research project. We developed a multi-method research design to examine the digitalisation of tenant participation in the social housing sector in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. Datasets generated in 2015 and 2021 enable us to identify changes in social media use over time. The research design comprises three components: 1) a narrative literature review to identify the local, national and international evidence base on the use of social media and new communication channels for tenant participation in the social housing sector; 2) two digital audits of housing provider’s web and social media use; and 3) qualitative interviews and focus groups with 26 representatives from the social housing sector. This study was approved by the Human Ethics Research Committee at Western Sydney University (H14640).

2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

We carried out a narrative literature review\(^\text{1}\) to gather and examine the international evidence base on what tenant participation is becoming in an increasingly digital world and how digital technologies are shaping tenant-social landlord relationships. The literature review also strengthened our analysis of the data from the digital audits and qualitative datasets. The literature review identified the benefits and challenges for housing organisations in using new digital communication channels for tenant participation.

A comprehensive literature search resulted in 64 journal articles and reports on tenant participation in Australia and internationally. Of these 64 papers, only fourteen discussed the benefits and challenges of digital forms of tenant participation with the majority from the UK (ten papers) and a smaller amount of Australian research (four papers) (see Appendix A for a list of the fourteen papers). A literature search strategy that included key search terms was prepared by the researchers and is included as an appendix to this report (see Appendix B). The academic database Scopus was searched to generate a dataset of peer reviewed academic literature. Google scholar was also searched to capture book chapters, reports and conference publications as well as peer reviewed publications. The authors were cognisant of research being undertaken internationally by housing organisations, research centres and peak bodies that reflect current practices but were not necessarily included within academic databases. Therefore a search of known websites took place to ensure the inclusion of this valuable practice-based evidence.

We also collected published Tier 1 tenant participation strategies, prepared by housing organisations operating in NSW, examining them for definitions of tenant participation as well as digital participation strategies. The search located 22 tenant participation strategy documents, some of which were stand-alone strategies, and others were larger documents (e.g. Tenant Handbook) where tenant participation strategies formed a part.

\(^{1}\)The authors can provide a copy of the results of the literature search on request.
The database generated through the literature search was analysed to identify the benefits and challenges of digital tenant participation practices. The literature review highlighted gaps in the evidence base and helped to shape the approach to the collection of primary data through digital audits, interviews and focus groups. Evidence from the literature review is discussed throughout this report to support and contextualise findings emerging from other data sources.

2.2 DIGITAL AUDIT

Our digital audit identified CHPs through the NRSCH - National Provider Register and then mapped the digital footprint of each provider through desktop research of provider websites and social media platforms. Registered providers cut across housing associations, co-operatives and church-based agencies and consist of a great diversity in organisational and management structures, as well as service models. Some CHPs deliver other services as housing provision intersects with other contexts such as disability, domestic and family violence, drug and other alcohol, and homelessness services. Audits were undertaken at two points in time, in September 2015 and then again in September 2021. In September 2015, there were 130 Community Housing Providers registered in NSW. By September 2021, this number had grown to 172. This includes 57 providers that were not registered in 2015. Fifteen providers that were registered in 2015 were no longer registered in 2021. This change in provider numbers during this period reflects the extent of change within the sector.

The 2015 and 2021 digital audits come together to provide a longitudinal dataset on the extent to which CHPs use web and social media platforms. Housing providers’ websites were first searched to facilitate identification of social media channels in use. The main sites were Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Youtube, and to a much lesser extent, Instagram. Based on organisation websites and information gained from interviews, no other social media platform stood out to require inclusion in the audits. The dataset enables: a sector-wide picture of the social media footprint of CHPs; insights into patterns and trends in the uptake of social media platforms by CHPs; and, knowledge about how this footprint has evolved over time. Our analysis does not identify individual providers, rather it provides a holistic understanding of the extent to which web and social media channels are being used. The intent of social media platform use was explored through interviews and focus group discussions.

2.3 QUALITATIVE METHODS

Between September 2015 and February 2016, we undertook 13 in-depth interviews with 17 people who work for housing organisations in NSW to capture provider perspectives on social media use, tenant participation and housing advocacy. The digital audit assisted the researchers to identify organisations to approach to participate in the interview stage of this research. We sought to ensure a diverse mix of interviewees by including organisations of different: sizes; geographical locations (e.g. urban and regional); models of service delivery; client groups (e.g. Aboriginal housing; domestic violence or homelessness); as well as varied approaches to social media and web use (including non-use). Interviews involved 14 participants from CHPs, two participants from NSW Housing and one from the Aboriginal Housing Office (AHO), both divisions of the NSW Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS). Interviews were conducted face-to-face or by phone, where face-to-face was not possible. A copy of the interview schedule is provided as an appendix to this report (Appendix C).

In 2021, we conducted three focus groups. These online focus group interviews included nine participants in total who were working in the community housing sector. The aim was to capture provider perspectives on social media use as well as data about how social media use, tenant participation, and housing advocacy has changed (or not) over the last 5-6 years. Focus groups also gathered provider perspectives on whether the COVID-19 pandemic has changed how housing organisations communicate with their

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*Some interviews were attended by multiple participants from the same organisation.
tenants. Online rather than face-to-face focus groups were selected because they are a time and cost-efficient way of gathering and updating data for this research project. Also, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, online focus groups were a viable option when face-to-face groups were not possible. An online focus group also allowed for participants who were located in the regions to participate which enabled a greater diversity of perspectives. Online focus groups work best with a smaller group of participants, in this case three participants from housing organisations and two facilitators. A copy of the interview schedule is provided as an appendix to this report (Appendix D).

2.5 APPROACH TO ANALYSIS

A large amount of qualitative data was generated through in-depth interviews and focus groups with people who work for housing organisations. These conversations were recorded, transcribed and then combined to form a large dataset. In accordance with ethical research practice and protocols, the data was then deidentified to ensure that participants and their organisations would remain anonymous and their confidentiality protected. We have synthesised the digital audit and qualitative findings into two key themes, which are 1) getting started with social media; and 2) going digital and staying 'traditional'.
3. GETTING STARTED WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

This chapter focuses on the use of social media platforms by social housing organisations for tenant participation purposes. Our qualitative data provides insights into how social housing providers get started with social media, as well as how they negotiate the tensions that social media use creates for their organisations. This chapter first outlines how social media use by housing organisations has changed over the six year study period. Our participants discussed how these platforms are being used, and the extent to which two-way conversations for tenant participation are occurring on social media platforms. Two of the main reasons that housing organisations are using social media are for advocacy and for marketing. This chapter concludes with a discussion of these purposes and their implications for tenant participation and engagement.

Anyway, so we then started with social media and when I say we’ve started, it’s probably I’ve started, and rather than doing it in a structured way, “Let’s develop a social media strategy, you know, let’s put these structures in place” and so forth. I thought it would be better to “Let’s start” and see what happens.” (Interview Participant, 2015)

3.1 BECOMING ‘SOCIAL’ WITH TENANTS?

“So about two years ago, I think there was a sense that people weren’t completely au fait with social media… That’s now changing” (Interview Participant, 2015)

Our digital audit shows that there has been an increase in uptake of social media accounts by Community Housing Providers (CHPs) in New South Wales (NSW) over the study period 2015-2021. Table 1 shows that there has been a:

- 33% increase in organisations who have Facebook accounts (from 37% in 2015 to 70% in 2021);
- 13% increase in organisations who are using Twitter (from 27% in 2015 to 40% in 2021) and an
- 11% increase in organisations using Youtube (from 18% in 2015 to 29% in 2021).

About one quarter of CHPs currently have an Instagram account and approximately two thirds of CHPs currently have a Linkedin account.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>September 2015</th>
<th>September 2021</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>48/130 (37%)</td>
<td>120/172 (70%)</td>
<td>+33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>35/130 (27%)</td>
<td>68/172 (40%)</td>
<td>+13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youtube</td>
<td>23/130 (18%)</td>
<td>49/172 (29%)</td>
<td>+11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>Not identified</td>
<td>42/172 (24%)</td>
<td>N/A*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linkedin</td>
<td>Not identified</td>
<td>63/172 (37%)</td>
<td>N/A*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total providers</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>172</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
A majority of CHPs in NSW now have Facebook, but use of other platforms (while growing) is still in the minority. Facebook is often a first choice for tenant participation because there is a perception that tenants are likely to be using Facebook over other platforms. Further to this, Facebook is considered to have the most potential for more ‘two-way’ dialogical forms of communication (also see Section 3.3 Social media for tenant participation):

Facebook is probably the most useful channel in terms of disseminating information to tenants and also getting more feedback from them because obviously everything we did has got to be a two-way conversation. We want to hear from them as much as we’re kind of telling them and I think Facebook is the best way to engage on a meaningful level (Interview Participant, 2015).

However, in 2021, the Facebook Pages of CHPs often resemble regularly updated websites, and act as website extensions which host and share information about current activities such as events and new programmes. As such, Facebook Pages are often being used as a one-way broadcast mechanism, rather a ‘two-way’ site of conversation with high levels of tenant engagement:

“Maybe like four or five years ago, maybe in 2015, like I was saying that kind of stuff [Facebook promotions] would be really engaging and would get a lot of people into it... I just think it’s changed so much recently like myself, and a lot of my friends don’t have Facebook or Instagram, there’s just like such a move away from it in general... We’ve had a lot of discussion of, we know that tenants maybe don’t use, don’t engage, with a social media post but it’s almost like its own website that you just put on Facebook in case anyone Googles and comes across it in this way and then see something is posted, rather than it being a thing. The traditional thing of, it gets this much reach and this much engagement, it just lives there now. Yeah, which I wouldn’t have thought of about Facebook two years ago.

(Focus Group Participant, 2021).

While there is a larger presence of CHPs on Facebook, our participants told us that Twitter is the key site for the sector and the platform of choice for CEOs and housing leaders agitating for change (also see Section 3.4 Social media for advocacy). Twitter is less a space for tenant participation and more a space that is shaped by vocal Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) driving debate and networking with their peers, prospective partners, politicians, journalists and the general public:

“Our boss is the only one that uses Twitter. And [name] is ferocious on it. You know, we get scared when [name] goes on Twitter, because they’re always stirring the pot... But it gets things happening. They’re on the mainsteam media every second day, just really out there advocating hard for what’s right” (Focus Group Participant, 2021).

The other platforms reviewed in our digital audit are used by a minority of CHPs often due to a lack of resources, as well as knowledge, skills and digital literacies. Many participants discussed wanting to explore the newer visual social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat and more recently Tiktok, due to their popularity with younger tenants (also see Section 3.2: Starting slowly with limited resources). They were refraining due to a lack of resources: ‘I’d like us to have Instagram, but we can’t resource it at the moment because we think it needs lots of pictures. And we just don’t have that resource in my team’ (Focus Group Participant, 2015). In this sense, organisations are not necessarily keeping pace with the changing social media landscape and how it is reworking the ways in which people access, consume and produce information and communication.

3.2 STARTING SLOWLY WITH LIMITED RESOURCES

Getting started with social media involves navigating differing expectations around: how will the social media space work, what purpose will it serve, who will maintain it, how will contributions be moderated, what training is required, and what do tenants want. Consequently, venturing into social media for tenant participation is often done at a ‘slow’ pace as it takes time to negotiate strategies and approaches:

“We’re also at the very, very baby steps of any social media engagement with our tenants. And, and then also for me, personally, in terms of social media, [I’m] not a big
A lack of resources impacts social media uptake as the curating and sustaining of new and existing social media spaces and communities requires knowledge, skills, energy, and time. Participants stressed this as a key issue both in 2015 and 2021:

You've got to put in the training and the education and everything so that it's not just anyone running a social media account... it's sophisticated on its own’ (Focus Group Participant, 2015).

It's a profession itself... you know, to drive content, you know, it takes time and energy to bring it there. But once you've got that content going, you know, it's a snowball (Focus Group Participant, 2021).

Having social media generates a significant amount of 'behind the scenes' work before something even makes it to a social media page as content (Condie & Richards, 2022). As one participant explained: 'It takes a resource to be able to get that [engagement], it doesn't just magically happen' (Focus Group Participant, 2021). Another participant talked about the challenges of creating content 'on the run' and the struggle to build social media making into everyday tenant engagement practices: 'But you know, being one person trying to facilitate, and then it can also be quite intrusive as well, you know, if you stop the flow of a conversation to say, "Hey, guys, I want to take a picture for Facebook", it's just not always appropriate’ (Focus Group Participant, 2021).

Resource constraints and perspectives on social media workloads are holding back some organisations from using social media and new communication channels for tenant participation. Participants talked about actively avoiding social media work and taking on any responsibilities for generating content:

So we don't have a Facebook Page. We don't even have a company LinkedIn profile... So I think we just don't have the resources to monitor those channels (Focus Group Participant, 2021)

I'm not even putting my hand up to look after a Facebook group at this point in time. One because I don't really see the need for it with our particular ones [tenants]. But also, it's a profession itself, no offence [name of another participant], you know, to drive content, it takes time and energy to bring it there. But once you've got that content going, it's a snowball (Focus Group Participant, 2021).

IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 1:
Dedicated specialist resources are required to make social media and build online communities and relationships with tenants.
3.3 SOCIAL MEDIA FOR TENANT PARTICIPATION

There are a range of practices in play when it comes to using social media for tenant participation. For some participants, tenant participation on platforms such as Facebook ‘has got to be a two-way conversation’ for ‘meaningful’ forms of engagement (Interview Participant, 2015). One participant talked about using social media in ways that deepen their relationships with tenants and to facilitate their role as more than a landlord, perhaps even a ‘friend’:

“So it’s about creating or making them aware of - wanting them to engage with us because - not because we’re their landlord, because of all these other things that we provide to them. So they need to see us more as a partner along their journey to achieving, you know, a better life and to see us, you know, as a support - as a friend if you like, so part of their support network. Once we can - and that’s all part of one of the things we’re trying to create via social media. If we can create that then engagement on Facebook will be - will improve because they will see us more as a friend as opposed to, you know, a landlord” (Interview Participant, 2015).

Some of the deeper forms of engagement are taking place in Facebook Groups rather than on public Facebook Pages. Participants reported that Facebook Groups afford stronger tenant participation as the spaces are more private and conducive to ‘two-way’ conversations and relationship building. Facebook Groups are being used in localised and place-based ways to build communities within particular buildings or neighbourhoods. The pandemic conditions emphasised the value and importance of these networked communities. The following excerpt provides an example of a Facebook Group being used to support new tenants with housing after being homeless:

“So we started off very terribly. They [new tenants] didn’t want to have any engagement with anybody, with each other, it was very difficult. But then, because of the pandemic, and they had a COVID scare, we have dedicated project officers out there now. And we’ve created a private Facebook group for them. And they’re all really, really engaged. So I mean, that wouldn’t be possible if we didn’t have that social media platform, that private Facebook group” (Focus Group Participant, 2021).

While Facebook Groups can offer tenants greater privacy and therefore space to speak about their housing and form relationships with neighbours and community members, organisations reported using Facebook Groups as a way to take tenant perspectives on their housing out of the public realm of a Page where negative comments can harm the organisation’s reputation and brand. A closed Facebook Group offers a way to generate two-way conversation but it can also serve to control what gets discussed in public, which is what many organisations are seeking to do given the permanency and visibility afforded by social media. More closed digital spaces offer “control around it and not just being an open platform where anyone can get in and see what young people are saying” (Interview Participant, 2015). The tension between creating spaces for tenants’ critique of their housing and managing the organisation’s reputation is evident in:

“I want them [tenants] being heard by us, and almost in a no-holds barred way to us, but I don’t want that necessarily externally available...there’s a real balance there for us that’s - and of course you don’t want people trashing your reputation online. You know we can do loads and loads of good work and three people go off and, for some valid, some not invalid reasons, you know it can impact our reputation and that’s something we’ve got to consider without muzzling them. So it’s a balance I suppose” (Interview Participant, 2015).

Like our board didn’t want, people will be able to comment on posts. But my response to that was, what’s the point, you want a social media account, but you don’t want people to comment, it’s about how you manage those comments, and also...we haven’t had too many negative things out of that. We’ve had a few, I’m not gonna lie. (Focus Group Participant, 2021).

This tension results in some organisations actively avoiding social media spaces or closing down opportunities for tenants to speak, be heard and influence their housing: “Of course the other thing we’re using is Facebook. But we’re not allowing people to interact with Facebook” (Interview Participant, 2015). According to one participant, how organisations manage negative comments from tenants in social media spaces is indicative of the organisation’s “resilience” (Interview Participant, 2015).
Instances of where tenants are in greater control of tenant participation practices were rare within our datasets with approaches being ‘top down’ rather than ‘bottom up’. Although, some participants acknowledged the limitations of top-down approaches to tenant participation and how participating in organisational-led activities may not be so ‘safe’ (Interview Participant, 2015) for tenants because of the power inequalities between tenants and their social landlords. One participant argued that their organisation needed to take more of a ‘back seat’ and shift their practices so tenants can own the participatory spaces of housing:

“...We need to take more of a back seat and be more of a voyeur and allow them to have a conversation in maybe a safe place. Where we can, you know, not necessarily be guiding the conversation but more of a spectator and then we’ll be able to learn and understand more about the needs and wants of our residents in that space without them feeling like we’re necessarily telling them...I think they need to feel that they own that space” (Interview Participant, 2015).

Further research is required with tenants to learn about how they are using social media with one another to organise and influence their housing. Tenant-led Facebook Groups are likely to be more commonplace (see Smith & Yell, 2020) than reported by our participants and this requires further exploration, particularly in terms of their role for tenant-led forms of housing advocacy and activism.

### 3.4 Social Media for Advocacy

‘In the absence of a federal housing policy. And then the absence of more social housing. Yeah, we have to be advocating. And we have to be doing it on social media... No one else is going to do it. So yeah, I think it’s critical to get people to think how, how to change the story and how we can get more housing’ (Focus Group Participant, 2021).

In addition to tenant participation, one of the main reasons that housing organisations use social media is for housing advocacy, and this is increasingly important given the current crises around housing. Social media affords connections to key stakeholders such as other housing and housing-related organisations, peak bodies, politicians, policy makers, news media outlets, local businesses, prospective partners, and investors, as well as philanthropic donors. A key affordance of social media is that housing organisations are more able to join together in online spaces for sector-wide advocacy work, in ways that were less possible through mainstream media or ‘traditional’ channels:

“I think, you know, we’re quite small, relatively speaking individually as providers, but we can do great things when we collaborate and combine” (Focus Group Participant, 2021).

Participants singled out the social media platform Twitter as “where you do your advocacy and lobbying” (Interview Participant, 2015). A number of participants reported that Twitter was their most active space where ‘definitely advocacy... is where we probably get the most engagement from’ (Focus Group Participant, 2021). Twitter enables organisations “to really position ourselves as a voice in the sector” (Interview Participant, 2015). This is not dissimilar to how other sectors such as public health (Jackson, Brennan & Parker, 2021), science (Jahng & Lee, 2018) and education (Schuster, Jörgens & Kolleck, 2021) as well as the non-profit sector more broadly (Guo & Sexton, 2014) are using Twitter to organise and advocate for social change.

While housing organisations are using Twitter for a ‘voice’ on social housing, tenants’ voices are noticeably less present in this advocacy space. Twitter is not where housing organisations regularly interact with their tenants: “If you
look at our Twitter feeds, we don’t get many tenants signing on and that’s okay because Twitter is actually not...most tenants are not going to Twitter because I don’t think they use, sorry, I’m making an assumption here, they’re not going to use that platform much” (Interview Participant, 2015).

There’s only ever “a couple of people. So the Chair of our tenant advisory group, they’re quite active on Twitter. But no, not really, not many tenants” (Interview Participant 2015). Given the absence of tenants from the tweeted advocacy work of the social housing sector, our questions therefore become: where are tenants in housing advocacy? How does housing advocacy and tenant participation intersect? And why is a social media space without tenants the platform of choice for advocacy?

Tenants do feature in the tweeted advocacy work of housing organisations, most prominently in the telling of tenant stories, which are used to promote social housing and in so doing attempt to change negative societal perceptions of social housing tenants.

“I think if we can show stories about people... we have some tenants that have been amazingly successful in their life” (Focus Group Participant, 2021).

It could be an educational piece to say, you know, you’re valued, and we want to tell your story, because you’re incredible. And we’ve got residents who were studying medicine, like, I’ve got a resident who’s doing a PhD at the University, and like, you are so intelligent, like, can we just please, I want to be able to tell your story and encourage her” (Focus Group Participant, 2021).

When tenants’ stories are told, the focus is often on tenants who are considered ‘successful’ in terms of countering mainstream ideologies of living in social housing as ‘unsuccessful’. In telling tenant stories, rather than tenants telling them directly in a more dialogical form of conversation, organisations can remain “in control of the narrative” (Interview Participant, 2015). In this sense, housing advocacy is something done for tenants and less so with tenants. If tenants were more centred in housing advocacy contexts (i.e. Twitter), what is advocated for might also shift.

The under-representation of tenants from these tweeted advocacy conversations and campaigns is complex and requires further research with tenants to better understand what is happening. There are also digital barriers to participation to take into account with regards to Twitter and the digital literacies required to use it (also see Section 4.1: Acknowledging digital inequalities). Schradie (2018) notes a ‘digital activism gap’ where social class impacts participation in digital activism, more so on Twitter in comparison to Facebook. Housing advocacy requires tenants to have the financial, social and emotional resources to champion social housing in the classed public spheres of social media platforms. Housing organisations could be implementing strategies to support tenants to participate in important housing advocacy spaces such as Twitter.

**IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 4:**
Digital forms of housing advocacy are often being carried out for and not with tenants.

### 3.5 SOCIAL MEDIA FOR MARKETING

“So it’s basically turning everything into content and I suppose it’s turning what people regard as just normal activities of organisations into media and I don’t think that’s in people’s heads” (Interview Participant, 2015)

Social media are important sites for marketing, developing a brand identity and conveying organisational values for the social housing sector. Organisations are using social media to convey their values in order to generate philanthropic donations and investments: “I think people looking at ethical investments, they may see, “Oh yeah, they’re a kind of organisation I’d like to invest in,” or, “Yeah, I’ve been following them on Twitter and they seem to have good values, and if I’m going to leave anybody money in my will...” That kind of thing” (Interview Participant, 2015).

As for housing advocacy, Twitter was again reported as a key site for marketing. When marketing and advocacy digitally come together, organisations have to balance competing priorities to not be “seen to be overly critical of a funder, but...
“you certainly, I think, have an obligation, given what we do and who we house, to be advocates for the sector, and advocates for our tenants” (Interview Participant, 2015). The tensions around these competing interests and motivations for social media use impact tenant participation.

Spaces such as Twitter present a challenge for organisations who might otherwise have kept their different stakeholder groups and audiences separated. A ‘context collapse’ (Marwick & boyd, 2011) of funders and tenants in the same digital spaces has implications for an organisation’s reputation and brand. For some, the problem group is perceived to be tenants, because of their power to negatively impact the organisation’s reputation and brand. Organisations worry about what tenants might say about them in these spaces, as noted earlier: ‘Of course you don’t want people trashing your reputation online’ (Interview Participant, 2021) due to the potential repercussions for funding and reputation if negative comments from tenants are visible within the public domain (also see Section 3.3 Social media for tenant participation). The marketing goals of an organisation can therefore close down avenues for tenants to participate in housing advocacy (also see Section 3.4 Social media for advocacy).

On an organisational level, it matters where the responsibilities for social media management and digital engagement are located and held. The following excerpt depicts some of the disconnection between departments within organisations and the implications of overlapping and competing responsibilities for social media engagement:

“’I’m the Marketing Officer. So we’ve got the marketing team, and then we’ve also got the community engagement team. And I think we’ve found that now that that’s been split up, we’ve kind of been a little bit more disengaged with both teams. So we found that really difficult…because we’re not a part of the same, you know, business unit, we’ve found that we’ve been a little bit more disengaged with them. So we’re looking at rejigging everything to be able to increase that engagement with tenants and reach out to them more, because I think it’s a missed opportunity. And we’re missing out on it, missing out on quite a bit” (Focus Group Participant, 2021)

Organisations therefore need opportunities and spaces to critically reflect upon tenant participation, where it sits within the organisation, and how that impacts its motivations and goals, practices and outcomes. Organisations could consistently acknowledge the status of tenants within their communication strategies and prioritise them and their contributions across their communications spaces.

**IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 5:**
Marketing, advocacy and tenant engagement and participation practices in online spaces can overlap and cause tension.
This chapter outlines how digital channels of communication are being increasingly introduced by housing organisations, while ‘traditional’ channels are also being maintained. We first describe digital inequalities in relation to the access, affordability, and digital capabilities of tenants, drawing also on the framework and evidence from the Australian Digital Inclusion Index. As many tenants are ‘mobile-only users’, the effectiveness of text based forms of communication is outlined. The chapter concludes with analysis of how digital and traditional channels were used during the COVID-19 pandemic when common communication practices were disrupted by social distancing and isolation requirements. Our research shows how the pandemic has, to an extent, clarified the value and importance of networked communities.

“...we want to grow our reach and better reflect a younger and more geographically spread population through greater digital opportunities (e.g. online repairs & maintenance focus groups) but are also mindful of retaining traditional face-to-face” (Focus Group Participant, 2021)

4.1 ACKNOWLEDGING DIGITAL INEQUALITIES

‘As services from health to education shift in whole or part to modes of automated, online delivery, the consequences of exclusion for [some] Australians are likely to translate into lost opportunities and restricted options for work, education, citizenship, and social connection’ (Thomas et al, 2021, p.8).

Tenants experience social, economic and spatial inequalities in accessing and affording the devices, infrastructures, networks, and spaces that are necessary to participate in new digital practices (Thomas et al, 2021). As the quote above explains, people who are unable to digitally connect will not have access to the same opportunities as those who are able to do so. The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) measures digital inclusion across the three dimensions of Access, Affordability and Digital Ability. The ADII shows that the form of tenure that people have matters because it is linked to how digitally included they are likely to be. People who rent from a public housing authority are more likely to experience digital exclusion across all three dimensions (Access, Affordability and Digital Ability) than the rest of the population. The latest index data shows that for Australians who rent from a public housing authority:

- 24% are highly excluded (national average is 11%)
- 16% are excluded (national average is 17%)
- 37% included (national average is 32%)
- 23% are highly included (national average is 41%)

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*This quote is from a follow-up email from the focus group participant.

*The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) tracks and reports on digital inclusion in Australia. It is a collaboration between the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated-Decision-Making & Society at RMIT, the Centre for Social Impact at Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra.

Participants consistently pointed out digital access issues for their tenants: “A lot of the tenants don’t access the Internet. While most of them have mobile phones, they might not have Internet access so the decision to keep the communication via printed newsletter seems to make the most sense” (Interview Participant, 2015). Importantly, about one quarter of public housing renters are found to be ‘mobile only users’ who are people with no access to another device, such as a laptop or desktop, to use the Internet (Thomas et al., 2021 p.6). People with disabilities also rank lower on Access measures as do those who live in regional areas (Thomas et al., 2021).

The Affordability of data plans was raised by our participants: ‘It’s something we’re really conscious of... you know that data poverty is a real thing’ (Focus Group Participant, 2021). In terms of the ADII data, a telling statistic is that 34% of people who rent from a public housing authority (compared with 14% across the Australian population) would need to pay 10% or more of their household income to gain quality, reliable connectivity (Thomas et al., 2022).

Digital Ability scores are lower for people who rent from a public housing authority (56.8 points) compared with the national average (64.4 points) (Thomas et al., 2022). Digital Ability scores were also lower for people residing in regional areas, and also for people who live with disability (Thomas et al., 2022). Digital Ability scores also closely align with age (Thomas et al., 2022). Of note, having a language other than English (LOTE) is associated with a higher Digital Ability score.

Socio-spatial inequalities were raised by participants, particularly for those who work for organisations based in rural and regional locations: ‘It’s really, really difficult for us to engage with people using technology’ (Focus Group Participant, 2021). The Index data reveals substantial socio-spatial inequalities: the ‘divide between metropolitan and regional regions is marked’ (Thomas et al., 2022 p.5). The reason for this digital inequality is not only about the ‘higher costs of laying infrastructure’ but also about the lower socioeconomic status of residents in rural areas who experience ‘a double jeopardy of digital disadvantage in that those who live further away from major cities experience inequalities to the access to infrastructure but also in other areas of life such as education and work’ (Park, 2017 p.407).

It is important to note that the ADII does not publish data by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status. However, understanding the Access, Affordability and Digital Ability for this group is important given the large number of Aboriginal people who are social housing tenants. Results from the 2018-19 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey show that 34% of Indigenous adults rented through social housing in 2018-19 (AIHW & NIAA, 2021).

A final point is that tenants who are digitally included may not want to engage with their social landlords. The ADII shows that for those tenants who rent from a public housing authority, 60% are either digitally or highly digitally included. The difficulties that some providers report in digitally connecting with tenants may not be due to the lack of affordability, access and digital ability of tenants. Therefore, addressing the barriers to digital inclusion may improve overall online engagement, but may still see some tenants not connecting with their social-landlords online. As Flynn (2019) notes, tenants can be well connected online but not necessarily connected to their landlords (p. 27). Participants told us that tenants and their social landlords are often on the same digital platforms but are not connecting as tenants do not want to do so: ‘So I do think our tenants do use social media, I just don’t think they necessarily interact with us on it’ (Interview Participant, 2015).

It is important to question why, even when digitally connected, many tenants do not want to engage with their social landlord. There is an apparent ‘digital disconnect’ where tenants and their social landlords are near to one another on the same digital platforms, but yet still so far apart in terms of interaction. The ‘context collapse’ (Marwick & boyd, 2011) noted early (see Section 3.5 Social media for
There are a growing number of ways in which tenants and their social landlords interact. Participants reported that the most common modes of communicating with tenants were through: a tenant information kit (for new tenants), SMS texts, letters, websites, social media platforms, phone, email, face-to-face, paper-based newsletters, tenant advisory councils or groups (TAGs), and a survey of tenants (usually annually). We found that ‘new’ digital channels are not necessarily replacing ‘traditional’ approaches as they are introduced. This is resulting in a larger and increasingly complex set of communication practices.

Participants reported that a variety of communication approaches, both established and new, are necessary to engage with all tenants (also see Hickman et al, 2018; Democratic Society, 2019). There is “definitely not a one size fits all approach” (Focus Group Participant, 2021) as some tenants may be comfortable with face-to-face meetings, where others may prefer ‘new’ digital approaches. Introducing new communication channels casts the net further and opens up communication possibilities with more people because it suits them better:

‘The trend is to widen engagement beyond the traditional ways and reach out to less engaged residents and, in particular, under-represented groups (such as young people)” (London Assembly, 2018, p.15).

While some organisations can go beyond a ‘one size fits all’ approach to embrace a multitude of communication practices, others are not able to diversify their communications as easily. We found that in some settings, all tenants regardless of their individual differences, are receiving the same information in the same way where, for example, “the 20 year old and the 75 year old [get] the same bit of information” (Focus Group Participant, 2021). Most organisations want to differentiate their communications and tailor information to tenants needs and preferences, but struggle to find the resources to do so (also see Section 4.2: Starting slowly with limited resources).

Some tenants do not connect with the engagement approaches predominantly used by their social landlords: ‘It has long been recognised that some groups have been excluded, either through discrimination, lack of opportunity, or because the opportunities available are unsuitable. These groups have become known to often well-meaning service providers as ‘hard to reach’” (Muir & McMahon, 2015 p. 6).

Taking issue with the label ‘hard to reach’ because it infers the tenant is to blame for not engaging, Muir & McMahon (2015) reframe these groups as ‘easy to ignore’. It follows that it is important to explore why tenants are not present within tenant participation practices so that targeted strategies can be put in place (Democratic Society, 2019 p.27). Further, tenant participation needs to be carried out ‘in spaces they [tenants] frequently occupy’ (Democratic Society, 2019 p.27). Such spaces may be physical and/or digital.

Participants agreed that insights around tenant information and communication preferences is “really critical” for getting...
tenants involved in the management of their housing (Focus Group Participant, 2021). However, organisations do not necessarily have access to this knowledge or the means to generate it: “I feel like it’s hard to get data about what the tenants actually want” (Interview Participant, 2015). Knowledge about ‘areas that have access to broadband; residents who have email; residents preferred communication and engagement channels; and, barriers to online engagement all influence an organisation’s digital engagement strategy’ (Flynn, 2019, p.27).

**IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 7:**
Housing organisations are increasingly using a larger and more complex set of communication practices to reach a greater diversity of tenants with tailored information.

### 4.3 MOBILE PHONES AND THE ACCESSIBILITY OF TEXT BASED COMMUNICATION

Both SMS and email are asynchronous forms of communication that are made (more) accessible by mobile phone. Many tenants are ‘mobile only users’ (ADII, 2021), and SMS messages are therefore proving a much more successful way to communicate with tenants over other channels: “Text is the most effective, yes definitely. Tenants won’t always pick up their phone. I’m not sure if letters get read but they’re sent” (Interview Participant, 2015).

Housing organisations have subsequently introduced customer management systems to allow for bulk SMS messages (texts) to be sent to tenants. Email communication was also reported to be a highly effective communication channel for sharing information and generating responses: “A number of tenants, you know, won’t answer the phone. They never ring you back. But if you send them an email, you’ll invariably get one back within five minutes” (Focus Group Participant, 2021).

The effectiveness of SMS and email makes sense as the latest data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) shows that the majority of Australians have a mobile phone and use it to connect to the internet (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). The proportion of households with access to the internet at home in 2016-17 was 86% with 91% of these households accessing the internet through their mobile phone (ABS, 2018). Societal expectations are also shifting around responsiveness and reply times, which are moving towards more instantaneous interaction in asynchronous formats (Farman, 2020). The effectiveness of SMS and email communication may also relate to, and indicate the moves away from talking on the phone and/or answering an unscheduled phone call (Harari et al., 2020), where there is less control over communication and also a lack of record. This shift is particularly documented for younger people who are more likely to prefer electronic, asynchronous forms of communication with their landlords (Ambrose et al., 2015; Harari et al., 2020). Receiving a text or email can also create time for the person to think about their response and reply more on their own terms, and if they have a smartphone, the message is often quickly delivered and received. Text and email also creates a record.

While mobile phone and email communication may be effective channels for many, they will not suit everyone. One participant reported that there can be issues when tenants change phone numbers and email addresses regularly: “The other thing that we struggle with is they change their numbers and their emails and the modes of comms very, very quickly because of how unsteady their situation is” (Focus Group Participant, 2021). Another participant explained: ‘Some people forget their passwords... [and] set up a whole new email account rather than changing the password if they’re not particularly tech savvy’ (Focus Group Participant, 2021). This is particularly problematic as increasingly digitised support services within and beyond housing often require email addresses and mobile phone numbers as essential contact details and for identity verification purposes (Coles-Kemp et al, 2020). Out of date contact information could create another disconnect between tenants and social landlords.

SMS and email messaging systems are useful for communicating messages to large groups of people. When the information is time critical, for example to alert communities and provide up-to-date information during disasters, SMS messaging systems are essential. As one participant states: ‘...coming back to the SMS alerts it seems

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* Asynchronous means communication that happens in a person’s own time e.g. you can reply to a text message one minute later or one day later. Synchronous communications are those that happen in real time e.g. a telephone call or zoom meeting.
to have really worked well in COVID...I guess that’s what we would do in terms of disaster management too’ (Focus Group Participant, 2021).

Given the effectiveness of SMS and email messaging, housing organisations could look to advance their use of text-based communication to deepen their tenant participation. For example, some tenants might be more open to interact with their social landlords in, for example, tenant advisory groups or other community discussion forums, if they are hosted and delivered in asynchronous text-based messaging formats. These approaches would also enable those with busy schedules to get involved in tenant participation activities when they are available to do so.

**IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 8:**

SMS and email messaging systems are increasingly important and effective forms of communication for housing organisations.

**4.4 CARING PRACTICES THROUGH PANDEMIC CONDITIONS**

*During the pandemic, we moved to an online engagement program, which has been quite successful for us... I think some of our events and things that we’ve started to run online, we will continue to regardless of pandemic or not, because it’s a different way of reaching people. And yeah, it’s exciting.* (Focus Group Participant, 2021)

In some settings, the COVID-19 pandemic has created the necessary conditions for tenant-social landlord communications to be digitalised. Under Public Health Orders, ‘stay at home’ restrictions were in place for the Greater Sydney region for more than 100 days from 26th June, 2021. People residing in locations deemed to be ‘Local Government Areas of Concern’ in western and south-western Sydney were also subject to tighter restrictions for some of that time. There were instances where particular social housing buildings were under stricter orders and subject to short term lockdowns where COVID-19 outbreaks were detected (Power et al, 2020). The government response to the pandemic saw a particular focus on public housing. Early in the pandemic a Melbourne housing building saw a rapid, strict lockdown with a high police presence (Power et al, 2020). Media reports emerged in the first days of the Melbourne public housing lockdown of factors that made it difficult for tenants to cope in the lockdown (e.g. broken lifts, inadequate cleaning) that also may have increased spread of the virus (Power et al, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to add to the complexities around tenant participation and engagement, and internationally, housing organisations and tenants are seeking to use digital approaches where possible going forward. For example, a Scottish study of tenants and digital engagements finds:

‘COVID-19 restrictions have significantly changed the way that housing organisations, and tenant, resident, and community groups operate. Traditional methods to engage and participate are now limited and have resulted in a great demand for online support and digital guidance to ensure we continue to meet the needs of our diverse and flourishing communities’ (TIS, 2020 p. 1).

Participants reported the need to engage online as ‘stay at home’ restrictions were introduced or people chose to self isolate. Some participants who reported engaging with new digital practices during the pandemic were keen to maintain this through post pandemic times and hoped it would strengthen engagement longer term: ‘We became a bit more digitally savvy and our residents have as well. I mean, that’s what they’ve told us, so I’m hoping that will increase their engagement with us online’ (Focus Group Participant, 2021). Another explained: ‘...if the pandemic hadn’t hit us, we wouldn’t have become so digitally savvy’ (Focus Group Participant, 2021).

For one housing provider whose tenants were subject to lockdown restrictions on their building for 16 days due to government Public Health Orders, facilitating digital communications was an essential way of ensuring tenant wellbeing under incredibly challenging circumstances. They used a number of approaches to maximise communications: “[we facilitated] daily zoom sessions with tenants and ensured they had adequate access to digital platforms to be able to engage with us while in lockdown because they otherwise
\[9 \text{ Synchronous communication happens in real time as opposed to asynchronous communication, which happens in a person's own time.}

However, not all participants reported an increase in digital practices during the pandemic, and difficulties connecting with tenants persisted: ‘We really struggled with tenant engagement, we thought during the pandemic, it would increase and it just didn’t... We thought digitally, we would be able to reach out to more residents and have them engage a bit more. And that’s just not what happened’ (Focus Group Participant, 2021).

Phone calls for welfare checks increased during the pandemic and were an effective strategy to reach out to tenants and engage in caring practices: “We did a lot of phone calls...people are very lonely, and the majority of our tenants are single people and older people (Focus Group Participant, 2021), and ‘during COVID, we definitely did more well-being calls or completely changed over our tenancy inspections to well-being calls and managed to call, I think all of our 1000 tenants which they really appreciated” (Focus Group Participant, 2021).

One organisation reported a very successful program with neighbour calls to reduce loneliness and isolation during the pandemic. The Friendship Ageing Network is a particularly community-orientated example of tenant participation that facilitates the formation of new relationships among tenants:

“We have run a program called Friendship Ageing Network. So it’s like our older residents who otherwise would be isolated, have volunteered themselves to call other residents. So they’ve created friendships with each other, which I think is beautiful. And we ended up expanding that...” (Focus Group Participant, 2021).

It is worth noting that a phone call is an example of synchronous* communication working effectively. Phone call welfare checks arguably represent a return to more ‘traditional’ forms of communication and the value of continuing with, or returning to, some long standing communicative practices. It is also an acknowledgement of the critical role in care that social housing organisations need to provide especially in times of crisis.

\[IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE :9\]
In the contexts of crises such as the pandemic, housing organisations have needed to adapt their communications in a timely manner.

\[IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE :10\]
The pandemic context reaffirms the need for communicating in ways that care for tenants.

4.5 BACK TO BASICS

We are trying to look at doing something next year, where we get out and about and connect with people and just invite them out for a cup of tea and a chat. Like, that’s not normally the kind of engagement work that we would do, necessarily, but it’s we just need to get out and about back to basics, talk to people and encourage them to come out and feel safe...potentially not having had much contact with people for a long time, which is I don’t think it’s very good for any human.

I know I struggled with it (Focus Group Participant, 2021).

The pandemic has encouraged reflection and for some, a ‘recalibration’ (Stirling, 2019) of what matters for tenant participation and in times of ‘intersecting crises’ (Ang, 2021). When a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic occurs, there are always disproportionate impacts upon communities, especially for those that are from groups who are marginalised by society. The pandemic conditions required community housing providers to get ‘back to basics’ as the participant above terms it. Where strong relationships do not already exist, getting back to basics can be fundamental for beginning to build trusting relationships and to hear what it is that people need and want.

In our 2015 data, in pre-pandemic times, participants also talked about this notion of getting ‘back to basics’. The importance of face-to-face encounters within tenant participation and a way to address a lack of engagement were highlighted:

\[\text{* Synchronous communication happens in real time as opposed to asynchronous communication, which happens in a person’s own time.}\]
"And so that's one of the reasons why we're running these tenant workshops is to find out whether they're just not engaging with us because they just don't — they want to live in the house and not be bothered by us or whether it's that we're not providing the things they need. Whether that is a product or whether it's, you know, for example, if they're not following us on social media is it because they don't understand social media or is it because the content that we're putting out is not interesting or relevant to them. So, yeah, we're kind of going back to basics with these tenant workshops and really trying [to] drill down into where that lack of engagement is coming from" (Interview Participant 2015).

For social housing practitioners, face-to-face conversation, over other and newer modes of communication including social media and digital platforms, remains essential for tenant engagement, and more broadly, as the most meaningful way to connect with another person, and as a way to generate tenant engagement or address a lack of participation:

"I must say, there's one thing I've learned, is you can give people lots of bits of paper and information but a lot of the time they just don't read it. Unless you're willing to go out and talk to people and get involved somehow and you're physically there it's just not going to work in my opinion" (Focus Group Participant, 2021).

Other impacts from the heightened face-to-face tenant participation practices were also reported, particularly in support of the complex work that providers do to sustain tenancies. Participants talked about the importance of taking a more caring approach in relation to tenancy issues such as rent arrears, property care issues, or neighbour disputes. Tenant engagement and community development officers need time and resources to be able to create those opportunities for connection to resolve complex tenancy issues.

We want to have really positive relationships, because that's it...having the relationships with the tenants so that we can have those conversations if they're in arrears or there's property care issues or those neighbourhood issues, then you know, we have the relationships to have those really difficult conversations and hopefully then, you know, it doesn't end up with us in the tribunal and things like that. We can alleviate some of that. Because we're all about obviously sustaining tenancies (Focus Group Participant, 2021).

So we're sort of getting them [tenants] together. And we're sort of like him doing that empowerment. But one tenant, she was in like $4,000 of arrears, and then she started paying. She started up after we had those engagements with her. She started paying her payment plan again. So... and we didn't talk about rent, yeah, we didn't talk about anything about her tenancy. That was a really positive outcome for her. So opportunities just to reach out and connect really. Focus Group Participant, 2021).

However the pandemic and lockdown experiences have also impacted in person community events, which are now less attended. One participant pointed towards the health issues that many tenants are managing and how attending face-to-face events is not worth the risk:

"I think COVID is still in people's minds...people are really elderly. If they get COVID, whether they're vaccinated or not...and I just wonder with that cohort of people in their 80s and 90s. Why would they take the risk of going for free coffee and it's gone? It's just not worth it." (Focus Group Participant, 2021).

Although lockdowns were effective at 'slowing the spread of the virus', older people 'tend to be more socially isolated, have smaller networks and may also suffer from chronic illnesses and/or rely on community services' (Siette et al, 2021 p. 2), which are factors that may leave them more vulnerable. Older people also make up a key tenant demographic with one in three Community Housing tenants in NSW aged over 55 and 10% of households frail aged (over 80 years old, or over 55 years old and Aboriginal) (CHIA, 2018 p.16). Older people are particularly vulnerable in the event of immediate and life threatening disasters such as fires and floods (Fountain et al, 2019) so there is a strong need to be connected.
The pandemic conditions and other overlapping disasters such as drought, fires and floods have for many, (re) emphasised the value and importance of networked communities. Getting ‘back to basics’ centres the community building processes of tenant participation. It is about care, and connecting with people, whether those people are staff working for the housing organisation, fellow tenants, neighbours, and members of the local community or neighbourhood. These practices recognise that current ways of living, particularly during the pandemic, can be isolating and that facilitating connections between people, and building community, is important.

**IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 11:**
Implication for Practice 11: Face-to-face encounters within communities and neighbours remain highly valued. Opportunities for connection and community are important for tenants.
5. CONCLUSIONS

More than crisis, housing is now in a state of emergency in Australia and in many other countries around the world. It is scarce, unsafe, insecure and unaffordable and many people are living in stressful circumstances and uncertain conditions as they search and wait for somewhere to live. The COVID-19 pandemic, housing affordability, the financialisation of housing, precarity, rising inequality, cost of living, and climate change are some of the ‘intersecting crises’ (Ang, 2021) that are playing key roles in people’s lives. In such crises, tenant participation and the form it takes requires critical interrogation to ensure the social housing works in the best interests of tenants, and that tenants have agency within the making and sustaining of their housing.

As digital platforms are increasingly important sites where social housing agendas can be negotiated, tenants might use them to hold governments and housing organisations to account for the buildings, services, and neighbourhoods they provide. Social media are also central to localised social and community infrastructures, and can allow for the resources embedded in these networks (both tangible and intangible) to be accessed and distributed in ways that support tenants with their housing needs.

This mixed methods research study, carried out over a six-year period, focused on how housing providers are digitalising their tenant participation practices, with a particular focus on social media use within the social housing sector in New South Wales Australia. Central to our research was the desire to support and inspire social housing practitioners and organisations to embrace new digital practices in ways that strengthen tenant participation to help achieve a more just housing system and connected communities.

5.1 MAIN FINDINGS

Getting started with social media
Chapter 3 focused on the use of social media platforms by social housing organisations for tenant participation purposes. Our research shows how social media use by housing organisations has changed over the six-year study period. Our qualitative data explains how social media platforms are used and provide insights into how social housing providers get started with social media, as well as how they negotiate the tensions that social media use creates for their organisations.

Over the six-year period of our study, our digital audits of social media use show that there has been an increase in uptake of social media accounts. A majority of Community Housing Providers (CHPs) in New South Wales (NSW) now have Facebook, but those who use other platforms such as Instagram and Twitter for tenant participation are still in the minority. Facebook is often a first choice of housing providers for engaging with tenants. However, our
research shows that Facebook is often used as a one-way broadcast mechanism, and there are missed opportunities for ‘two-way’ conversations.

One of the main reasons that housing organisations use social media is for housing advocacy. Housing organisations have an important role to play in advocating for tenants, as well as addressing the stigmatisation of social housing. Housing organisations are able to join together in online spaces for advocacy, in ways that were not possible through mainstream media or ‘traditional’ channels. The findings from our digital audit and qualitative data show that Twitter is the key site for housing advocacy and the platform of choice for housing leaders agitating for change. However, tenants are not as visibly present in these tweeted advocacy discussions and that opportunities for tenant participation in the digital spaces of housing advocacy and housing justice could be further pursued.

Venturing onto social media platforms for tenant participation is often done at a slow pace as it takes time to negotiate strategies and approaches. This is also necessary given the potential to exclude tenants experiencing digital inequalities in terms of access and skills. A lack of resources also impacts social media uptake as a significant amount of ‘behind the scenes’ work is generated before something even makes it to a social media page as content.

Going digital but staying ‘traditional’
In our second analysis chapter Going Digital But Staying Traditional (Chapter 4), our research found that there are a growing number of ways in which tenants and their social landlords interact and an increasingly complex set of communication practices. We locate our analyses of digital inequalities within data from the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII), which tracks and reports on digital inclusion in Australia. Our qualitative data emphasises how a mix of both digital and traditional channels are needed because tenants have different communication
needs and preferences. Some organisations have blanket approaches to information sharing, which means that every tenant gets the same information in the same way. Knowing tenant preferences is critical for effective tenant participation, particularly as digital inequalities impact engagement needs in relation to the access, affordability, and digital capabilities of tenants. As many tenants are ‘mobile-only users’, participants emphasised the effectiveness of text-based forms of communication (i.e. SMS and email) for interacting with tenants. Societal expectations are also shifting around reply times and responsiveness, which are moving towards more instantaneous, real-time formats.

We found that the COVID-19 pandemic (re)emphasised the value and importance of networked communities. In some circumstances, the pandemic created the necessary conditions for digital tenant engagement and some housing organisations went online with their tenants quickly. For other providers, they did not need to, or were not able to transition participation practices to digital spaces. Phone call welfare checks increased during the pandemic and received positive responses, which represents more ‘traditional’ forms of communication and the value of continuing with, or returning to, some long standing communicative practices. Our focus group participants acknowledged the critical role in care that social housing organisations need to provide especially in times of crisis.

5.2 PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS
Throughout this report, a number of practice implications for housing organisations were provided that are grounded in the data generated through our research. It is envisaged that housing organisations may consider these practice implications and how each applies (or not) to their own local contexts. Given the diversity in providers as well as tenant groups, there will be no ‘one size fits all’ approach to using social media and new communication channels for tenant participation and engagement. Our research has shown that experiences among providers with social media vary widely, with some organisations just starting out while others are more advanced and are extending their uses of the various digital platforms and spaces.

The implications for practice identified throughout this report are as follows:

- **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 1:** Dedicated specialist resources are required to make social media and build online communities and relationships with tenants.
- **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 2:** Long standing power imbalances between organisations and tenants are being reproduced and potentially amplified within social media spaces.
- **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 3:** Critical and negative feedback and comments are likely within digital spaces that facilitate dialogue and two-way interactions.
- **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 4:** Digital forms of housing advocacy are often being carried out for and not with tenants.
- **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 5:** Marketing, advocacy and tenant engagement and participation practices in online spaces can overlap and cause tension.
- **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 6:** Digital inequalities around access, affordability and digital capabilities impact the lives of many people living in social housing (including the tenant participation strategies and practices of housing organisations).
- **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 7:** Housing organisations are increasingly using a larger and more complex set of communication practices to reach a greater diversity of tenants with tailored information.
- **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 8:** SMS and email messaging systems are increasingly important and effective forms of communication for housing organisations.
- **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 9:** In the contexts of crises such as the pandemic, housing organisations have needed to adapt their communications in a timely manner.
- **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 10:** The pandemic context reaffirms the need for communicating in ways that care for tenants.
- **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 11:** Face-to-face encounters within communities and neighbours remain highly valued. Opportunities for connection and community are important for tenants.
5.3 RESEARCH PRIORITIES AND NEXT STEPS

Our report culminates in four proposed directions for further research in this field. Given the scarcity of research on the use of social media and digital technologies within the social housing sector, particularly, how the impacts of digitalisation on tenant participation and engagement practices, more research into effective practices, with a focus on the diverse needs of differing local contexts and settings, would be beneficial for both providers and tenants.

1. The practices of ‘tenant participation’ to be re-worked to strengthen tenant influence over decisions that impact their own housing

Despite a shift to digital participation, tenant participation practices more broadly are limited in the Australian context. We call for tenant participation to be conceptually reworked so that it becomes positioned more prominently in the everyday practices of housing organisations, and the intent of tenant participation practices are communicated more broadly to key groups and communities. Instances of where tenants are leading and in control of tenant participation practices were rare within our research. Reconceptualising tenant participation allows for the elevation of tenants as actors within the production of their own housing.

2. Research to identify and support best practice approaches for using social media and other digital technologies to promote tenant participation

Our report highlights how the use of social media and digital technologies for tenant participation and engagement is an under-researched field. Our literature search only identified fourteen papers internationally on this topic. There is a diversity of housing providers operating in very different contexts, and the way that organisations use and approach social media and digital forms of communication needs to reflect the needs of their tenant groups and settings.

3. Research into tenant perspectives and experiences with social media and digital practices for tenant participation and engagement

Our report contains the perspectives of social housing practitioners working within housing organisations. Research with tenants about tenant participation and housing advocacy is essential to understand how social media and digital communications might work in ways that serve the best interests of tenants. There are opportunities for tenants to control and manage digital spaces that are co-created by tenants and housing providers. Research into how such approaches may be most effective is required.

4. Housing organisations to further develop programs that address digital inequalities and pursue equitable technologies with tenants

Our research highlights the impacts of digital inequalities for social housing residents and we call for policies and programs that pursue equitable technologies. Consistent with the broader research on digital exclusion, our research also finds that many tenants experience social, economic and spatial barriers in accessing and affording the devices, infrastructures, networks, and spaces that are necessary to participate fully in a digitalising society. This impacts on the possibilities of digital participation for many tenants who may be left out of the potential benefits of new and emerging practices.

Some social housing providers directly support tenants with digital access, for example, by installing free wifi in buildings so that tenants face one less barrier to use (see for example, Salix Homes (2016) who partnered with Salford Council to install free wifi in eight sheltered housing communities for elderly people in Salford, UK. More recently, in recognition that digital ‘access is a core function of modern life’, Yarra City Council in Victoria established a Smart Public Housing Project (Yarra City Council, 2022). This project is a partnership with government, not for profit and industry to expand digital access for people living in social housing. One of the initiatives includes a pilot of free wifi in communal areas of the Richmond Housing Estate (Yarra City Council, 2022). Similarly, RedWatch and Counterpoint have been lobbying for free wifi in public housing in inner-city Sydney (Shreenan, 2020). Increasing digital access may go some way to resolving some of the tensions and resourcing issues associated with going digital and staying ‘traditional’ when communicating with tenants. More broadly, digital access needs to be supported by affordable technologies and digital capabilities. Housing organisations are well placed to address and advocate for technological justice.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A
LITERATURE THAT REFERS TO DIGITAL APPROACHES FOR TENANT PARTICIPATION


8. London Assembly. 2018. Hearing Resident Voices in Social Housing. 06.11.2018_london_assembly_housing_committee_report_0.pdf


APPENDIX B
KEY SEARCH TERMS FOR LITERATURE REVIEW

### TABLE 1: SEARCH TERMS

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<th>Setting</th>
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APPENDIX C
2015 INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Introduction

1. Can you tell me a little about your organisation?
   1a. Size of organisation
   1b. Date established
   1c. Any unique selling points?

Communicating with tenants and stakeholders

2. How does your organisation currently communicate with tenants?
   Prompts: website, social media, newsletter, forums etc
   2a. Why this/these method/s?
   2b. How frequent is communication?

3. What do you communicate about?
   Prompts: planned works, tenancy issues, neighbourhood news, etc.

4. Has the way you communicate with tenants changed over the years?
   4a. If yes, why?

5. How effective do you feel your current forms of communication are?

6. Does your organisation use social media to engage with other stakeholders? If so, who, why, how?
   Prompts – other social housing organisations/ commentators, government, commercial partners, neighbours, philanthropists
   6a. If appropriate, ask Q3-5 in relation to the stated groups

Tenant participation/engagement

7. How do tenants communicate with your organisation?
   Prompts: text, social media, telephone, email etc.

8. What do they communicate with you about?
   Prompts: maintenance, tenancy issues, neighbourhood news, etc.

9. Does your organisation have a tenant participation scheme/forum?
   9a. If yes, what is it for?
      - How long has it been running?
      - How does it work i.e. face to face meetings and/or virtual?
      - How many tenants are involved?
      - What are their backgrounds?
      - How do you encourage involvement?
      - Do you feel the forum is effective?
      - Are there any improvements that could be made?
      If so, what?
   9b. If no scheme or forum, why not?
      Prompts: not required, no interest from tenants, etc.

10. Are there any particular audiences that are hard to engage with?
    Prompts - Age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, language, mental health, disability?
    10a. If yes, how could they be engaged?

11. Do any of your tenants experience barriers to participation?
    11a. If yes, what barriers?

12. Can you tell me about your tenants’ digital access?
    Prompts – smartphone, laptops, wifi?

13. Has the way tenants communicate with you changed over the years?
    13a. If yes, do you know why?

14. (If appropriate) Do you think they could make better use of social media to communicate with you? Why?

15. From your own experience, how could your organisation/social housing organisations improve their engagement with tenants?
APPENDIX D
2021 FOCUS GROUP SCHEDULE

Focus Group Interview Schedule
Some open ended questions for this focus group discussion are as follows:

Intro questions
Icebreaker - can you tell us a little bit about yourself, your role, what brings you to this focus group? And your favourite social media account or space?

Tenant participation
What does tenant participation look like in your organisation?
How effective do you feel your current forms of communication are for engaging with tenants?
Who do you engage with?
Prompts: Particular groups easier or harder
Why do you do tenant participation?
What are some of the possibilities / challenges?

Social media use for tenant participation
How important is social media to your tenant participation activities? Digital technologies for tenant participation?
How is your organisation going digital?
Where do social media and digital technologies feature within tenant participation/other stakeholders?
Are there any particular audiences that are hard to engage with? Does social media make any particular audiences easier to reach?
Can you tell me about your tenants’ digital access?
Has the way tenants communicate with you changed over the years?
How do you think tenants could make better use of social media to communicate with you?
How does your organisation use social media for other things?
Prompts - tenant participation, corporate partnerships, housing advocacy, information sharing.
Who are your key digital audiences and communities?
How has your organisation’s social media use changed over the years?
How does social media impact your organisation’s relationships with key stakeholders?

COVID-19 specific questions
Has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way your organisation communicates with tenants?
More specifically, has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way your organisation uses social media and digital technologies to engage with tenants?

Future questions
What is the future of tenant participation (in a digital age)? What is the future of the tenant-landlord relationship going forward?
What do you consider are the key opportunities/challenges of social media for your organisation?
How can new communication channels/strategies be best supported?
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