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Reconsidering government digital strategies within the context of digital inequalities: the case of the UK Digital Strategy

Efpraxia D. Zamani [1]✉ & Anastasia Rousaki[1,2]

In this paper, we critically examine the 2022 UK Digital Strategy and argue that the UK government adopts with this policy document a customer-centric vision of governance, which undermines the traditional role of the government as a provider of public services with principles of justice and impartiality. This shift, exacerbated by digital poverty, appears incongruent with the social contract between citizens and the state. We employ a critical discourse analysis to identify contradictory outcomes resulting from these neoliberal policies and showcase that the UK Digital Strategy, while seemingly committed to aspects of equality and inclusivity, appear to prioritise almost entirely market rather than citizens' interests.

[1] Durham University Business School, Durham, UK. [2] University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK. ✉email: efpraxia.zamani@durham.ac.uk

Introduction

The discourse surrounding technology in the public sector has consistently positioned it as a catalyst for transformative effects across various dimensions, including productivity gains, operational efficiencies, enhanced service delivery, and the promotion of accountability and transparency (Brown et al., 2017). More recently, the evolution of government digitalisation has taken a stride towards evidence-based decision-making (Höchtl et al., 2016), wherein policies are formulated and shaped by data-driven ideologies. This evolution has further strengthened arguments around the contribution of technology to the improvement of the public sector, wherein it is argued that the predictive power of data-driven approaches can significantly enhance the reliability and the legitimacy of decisions (Charles et al., 2022).

While the digitalisation of government and public services holds the potential for positive transformations within societies and businesses, the accelerated pace of this digital revolution, initially conceived in a 'no one left behind' paradigm, has paradoxically exacerbated existing structural inequalities (Meagher, 2015). This amplification of disparities is particularly evident when it comes to the welfare state and public services designed for vulnerable and underserved social groups, such as older adults and unpaid caregivers, whose socioeconomic status and demographics often pose barriers to the accessibility and usability of digital services (Zamani & Vannini, 2022).

It has been argued that this might be due to neoliberal approaches which notably "undermine the role of government as a provider of public services with principles of justice and impartiality" (Avgerou & Bonina, 2020, p. 74). An emphasis on customer-centric visions necessitates consumers with purchasing power and the ability to make informed individual decisions (Lorenz, 2012). Yet, at a time of accelerating digital poverty that challenges the interaction with the online world, when, where and how an individual needs to interact with (Zamani & Vannini, 2022), these ideologies appear incongruent with the social contract, which posits that, in exchange for adherence to state laws, citizens' lives, liberties, and freedoms are supported (Srinivasan & Ghosh, 2023). We posit that this perspective challenges the viability of current governance models in addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by digital inequalities, urging a re-evaluation of policy frameworks within a context where societal well-being is intricately interwoven with digital access and participation.

Therefore, with this study, we wish to critically analyse whether and to what extent the official policy discourse on digital technologies for growth and innovation considers digital inequalities. To do this, we adopt a critical discourse analysis (CDA) methodology, focusing specifically on the 2022 UK Digital Strategy (DCMS, 2022). The rationale for selecting this government strategy lies in its historical context, dating back to the first UK digital strategy published in 2017, which aimed to transform service provision. Despite its initial goals of fostering agility, flexibility, and a digital-by-default approach while ensuring inclusivity, a recent House of Lords committee report from 2022 indicates that digital exclusion remains a significant concern (House of Lords, 2023), with about 19 million people considered as digitally excluded (Deloitte, 2023). We consider this contradiction between policy making and reality of the grounds worthy of exploration: as the facets of our everyday life continue to be digitalised, leveraging the digital for growth and productivity within the context of digital inequalities is likely to have negative repercussions for both strands. As such, scrutinising the official government strategy that aims to operationalise policy and set the direction and pace can be highly informative regarding the intention and overall approach.

In what follows, we delve into the theoretical background that underpins public policy in the realm of digitalisation. Following this, we introduce Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the theoretical framework guiding our study, and we then present our findings. The paper concludes with a discussion of our findings and the study's conclusions.

Background

The background of our study draws from a broad narrative and discipline-agnostic literature review within the intersecting space of digitalisation and policy making.

Digitalisation and the state: policy making under neoliberal conditions. Much research has focused on the digitalisation of the public sector and the policies and principles that underpin relevant strategies (e.g., Kromidha & Córdoba-Pachón, 2016; Newman, 2020; Weerakkody et al., 2016). The majority of such studies to date tend to focus on the efficacy of digitalisation and the positive impacts on a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including businesses and citizens in terms of productivity, transparency and improved service delivery (e.g., Mergel et al., 2019; Pittaway & Montazemi, 2020). Indeed, the digitalisation of cumbersome and long-winded processes and interactions can significantly enhance citizens' interactions with public sector services (e.g., electronic medical prescriptions) (Lindgren et al., 2019), and in many cases, digital products and services bring down the barriers for people with disabilities (e.g., text to speech, textual image description) (van Toorn, 2024).

Despite the above obvious benefits of digitalisation, however, one should also notice its possible negative impacts, too. For example, Andersson et al. (2022) examined the implications of the digitalization of public services within the highly sensitive domain of social care, and found that despite the participative nature of the digitalisation process, there was an inherent negotiation imbalance among workers, managers, and technology, where standardisation and efficiency concerns, built-in within the technology itself, overshadowed those pertaining to service quality. There are several similar examples from the literature, where scholars draw attention to the negative (un) intended consequences, such as power structures and imbalances inscribed within the technology (e.g., Medaglia et al., 2021), worsening health outcomes as a result of the rigidity of the technology (e.g., Ziebland et al., 2021), and devoicing rather than empowering minoritized individuals and groups (e.g., Addo, 2022; Masiero, 2023).

The above can possibly be examined and understood through a bright side/dark side account of technology and digitalisation (Elbanna & Newman, 2022). For the purposes of this study, however, we wish to draw attention to the duality of the technology, whereby technology, and thus digitalisation by extension, is a "product of human action" and which "assumes structural properties" (Orlikowski, 1992, p. 404). Yet, at the same time, when such digitalisation and choices of design and implementation take place top-down, as in the public sector, we further argue that "technology is devised and deployed to further the political and economic interests of powerful actors" (Orlikowski, 1992, p. 401).

Indeed, scholars have drawn attention to the fact that the dominant discourse on digital governance persistently adopts strategies prevalent in the business sector (Avgerou & Bonina, 2020). Further, the effectiveness of large IT projects and digital transformation initiatives, and the often implicit ideological underpinnings (that build on industry concerns) of these are frequently criticised (Hjelholt & Schou, 2017). Specifically, it has

been argued that the overarching objective seems to be to redefine the dynamic between citizens and the state through the incorporation of digital business models that obey primarily to market logics (Lianos, 2022). In addition, the literature indicates that over the years, structural power has been shifting from the state to the market (Strange, 1996), where private actors are in position to influence politics and policy toward slimming and re-structuring the public sector (Self, 2021). There is a multiplicity of reasons that have supported such a shift, however, and within the context of our study, we argue that, as a result of the accelerated pace of digitalisation and technological advances, market actors, and particularly those leading digital businesses, have concentrated power and increased their influence over policy (Calvano & Polo, 2021). More importantly, however, this shift has resulted in the further strengthening of the neoliberal agenda, which advocates for government interventions more frequently than not for fostering entrepreneurial, competitive, and commercial behaviours that serve the market (Hathaway, 2020), rather than utilising technology for improving governing and governance for the benefit of citizens .

Digital Inequalities. The above need to be contextualised and interpreted against the backdrop of digital inequalities, as policy making becomes intertwined with technology, with markets being heavily influenced by digital platforms, and with citizens' lives being reshaped by data accumulation (Birch, 2020).

Existing literature refers to digital inequalities by employing different terms, including digital exclusion, digital divide and digital poverty. There are subtle differences between these terms, depending on the framing of the phenomenon. However, all three terms suggest unequal and differential access to the digital world (Zamani & Vannini, 2022), whereby people are unable to use as needed and desired "technology, infrastructure, services, facilities, and information" (Kuhn et al., 2023, p. 908). In our study, we adopt the term of digital inequalities as a more comprehensive term that captures the multitude of factors and outcomes, including but not limited to financial constraints, infrastructural barriers, personal circumstances (including disabilities), lack of digital skills, personal attitudes and perceptions (e.g., lack of trust and scepticism) (Helsper, 2021), where such inequalities result in and exist along "a continuum from deep exclusion to deep inclusion" (Asmar et al., 2022, p. 280).

There is a substantial evidence base that indicates that as digitalisation accelerates, digital inequalities deepen (e.g., Mubarak & Suomi, 2022; Robles et al., 2022; Velicu et al., 2022). Evidence of this can be found in the recent past, whereby digital inequalities have been particularly exacerbated in the aftermath of the cost-of-living crisis, when the combination of digital poverty and the fast-paced digitalisation of public services illustrated that, such policies can have deep exclusionary effects for certain social groups (Zamani & Vannini, 2022). Further, and as Imran (2023) highlights, the impacts of digital inequalities are far reaching, and as suggested, the surge of digitalisation has only deepened such inequalities, impacting older generations, resulting in exponential inequalities in global wealth and fierce market competition toward technological innovation.

Over the recent years, the significance of considering digital inequalities when considering the digitalisation of the public sector and digital-focused policies has also been acknowledged by governments and third-sector organisations, who have begun engaging in fairly coordinated efforts to mitigate the impact of such inequalities (Zamani & Vannini, 2022). In some cases, the underlying motivation for this lies in the acknowledgement that, within a digital society, such disparities pose a substantial impediment to equal participation, especially among its most vulnerable segments (Robles et al., 2022). Indeed, scholars have found that digital inequalities are characterised by compoundness and sequentiality whereby the digital world and one's position relatively to it (i.e., within or outside of it) amplify any inequalities experienced in the physical world and result to additional exclusions and disadvantages in other areas of their life (Van Deursen et al., 2017). In other cases, however, the motivation seems to lie primarily within the market logic itself, whereby digital inequalities stand as a barrier to cost cutting and creating efficiencies via the digitalisation route (Tilley, 2020).

The UK policy context and the focus of our study. The United Kingdom (UK) has been historically influenced by neoliberalism with the premise being that "there is no alternative to the market as a basis for organising society" (Ferguson, 2004, p. 1). Under the influence of neoliberalism, the market has been the primary mechanism for funding and resource allocation. In terms of the welfare state, this has translated into minimal support for the welfare state, and a preference for individualistic over collectivistic approaches (Ramon, 2008). Such an approach to the welfare state continues today in the UK, with neoliberalism creating markets for nearly everything. Within the area of social work, for example, the disappearing distinctions between commercial and non-commercial activities, between the public, the private and the voluntary sectors, combined with profit maximisation and cost cutting have resulted in what can be termed as the 'social work business' (Harris, 2003). As another example, the necessity of business is also seen in sustainability and environmental matters, whereby attention to the natural environment is required for economic prosperity and where 'sustainability means business' (Maxton-Lee, 2020).

The UK policy context has been further influenced by other events. The UK has been experiencing continuous austerity measures since late 2008, following the financial crisis, whereby said measures have been differentially applied between geographical regions and socio-economic classes, which resulted in disproportionate impacts. Indicatively, while these austerity measures were aimed at various areas of expenditure, crucially the largest cuts related to social protection measures (Farnsworth, 2021), which then later translated into increasing unemployment rates and socio-economic inequalities (Borges et al., 2013). These inequalities deepened and social divisions widened following the 2016 Brexit referendum even further (Powell, 2017).

The UK Digital Strategy has therefore been developed within the context of a highly turbulent and uncertain environment as Keep (2022) notes. The first version of the country's Digital Strategy came into being in 2017, and was developed by the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. In that first version, among the main objectives was that for the UK to establish itself as a "world-leading digital economy that works for everyone" (DCMS, 2017). The recent update, the 2022 Digital Strategy places greater emphasis on productivity, employment and pay ("The UK's economic future, jobs, wage levels, prosperity, national security, cost of living, productivity, ability to compete globally and our geo-political standing in the world are all reliant on continued and growing success in digital technology") in an effort to "strengthen [the UK's] position as a Global Science and Tech Superpower" (DCMS, 2022, p. 3); in this effort, there is still a commitment that "[n]o one, and no place, should be left behind" (DCMS, 2022, p. 6).

Yet, still, the UK seems to be lagging in meeting its digital inclusion targets as recently shown (House of Lords, 2023). A recent study has found that about 19 million people in the UK are digitally excluded (Deloitte, 2023), while another indicates that about 25% of the population (approximately 16 million) likely

struggle interacting with the online world, even for everyday tasks such as online banking and paying utilities online, where digital poverty results in further disparities (including fraud, being unable to save money and paying more, and being unable to plan ahead) (Lloyds Bank, 2023).

Drawing from the above, in this study, we draw our attention to the recent UK Digital Strategy (DCMS, 2022). We wish to explore whether and to what extent the official policy discourse on digital technologies for growth and innovation considers digital inequalities. Our intention is not to explore any possible changes on the grounds, or the relationships between this strategy and its operationalisation by the various public sector departments and agencies. Rather, we wish to expose the ideological underpinnings of a document that seeks to set the direction and pace of digitalisation, because possible (mis)alignments and imbalances between growth, innovation and digital inequalities within official documents can lead to counterproductive outcomes (McBride & Stahl, 2010). In so doing, we are inspired by Avgerou and Bonina (2020) who argue for the public sector digitalisation as being ideologically produced. For this reason, we specifically adopt critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA helps us investigate the use of language and communication means, such as linguistic choices, by policy makers and politicians, within the context of policy making, where CDA, as an analytical approach and method of critique, "provides an opportunity to explore what discourses emerge in the context of [the] topics" of digitalisation, inequalities and government strategy, and following from this, to identify and appreciate our attitudes regarding how the above influence (positively or negatively) our outlook and opportunities as citizens (Fleming et al., 2018, p. 2). This is discussed in further detail in the next section.

Methods

Analytical approach and theoretical context. Our study is grounded in the social constructionist perspective, which contends that language actively shapes social reality (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017). We abide to the idea that discourse in modern society legitimises government power and subjugates certain groups by promoting what is hegemonic societal "truth" (Perren & Jennings, 2005). We thus adopt Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explicate the culturally available, societal common sense as well as the ideologies and power dynamics that shape the way the ideas proposed in the document are framed. CDA, within the context of document analysis, provides the necessary analytical tools for a detailed textual analysis, where the unpacking of linguistic choices and underpinnings allows identifying the discursive constructions of the phenomenon of interest (Pechtelidis & Stamou, 2017). CDA also allows us to explore social practice structures and strategies, focusing on shifts in semiotic differences and agents' strategies in texts. It explicates relationships among discourses, and styles, considering alterations in their social structuring and ongoing interactions (Fairclough, 2012), where certain discursive repertoires are frequently employed and form what is widely accepted as common sense, both on an individual and socio-cultural level (Edley, 2001). Within the politics and government realms, CDA has proven useful in illustrating power struggles and negotiating interests. Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2023), for example, employed CDA for the analysis of Biden's inaugural speech, and showed how the instrument of language can be used to communicate intended but hidden meanings, and that it can also be used for the (re)production of power and dominance.

In the context of our study, CDA helps us explore socio-political issues and power imbalances by showcasing how power is discursively constructed via text (Fairclough (2012)). We are also influenced by Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony, aligning with the theoretical perspective that we are governed by ideologically prevailing beliefs that evolve into cultural assumptions, defining what is perceived as common sense or social reality (Edley, 2001). In addition, and with regards to the aspect of digital inequalities, we use the latter as the contextual background within which we conduct the analysis and interpret our findings. In other words, rather than using digital inequalities as the conceptual framework of the study, we instead leverage it as the context within which the UK Digital Strategy was developed.

Analytic procedures. For our analysis, we followed the four steps suggested by Fairclough (2012), and as applied by earlier studies with a focus on CDA, policy and technology discourses (e.g., Alvarez, 2001; Fleming et al., 2018; Lepistö, 2014). Table 1 provides a summary of the process and contains illustrative examples of our actions across the four steps.

We began by familiarising ourselves with the document of the UK Digital Strategy, which involved reading the document in detail multiple times, and began the micro-level analysis in NVivo, focusing on the elements of grammar, lexicon, and literary devices. This resulted in detailed accounts of the text, including its linguistic microelements and structures, to explicate the text's level characteristics, to identify discursive patterns and to attend to micro elements of speech that can be employed to construct power and hegemony (Wiggins, 2016). Next, we moved to the interpretation step, where we focused on the meanings and implications embedded in the rhetoric that is employed, discussing its underlying ideologies, power relations, and discursive strategies. The third step of Explanation emphasises the need to go beyond interpretations to explain the social and cultural contexts that influence the discursive terrain; this involves the identified linguistic elements to broader socio-political and cultural structures and apparatuses. The final step, which is evaluation, involves assessing the discourse's social significance and potential effects. This includes considering how the discourse contributes to or challenges existing power structures and ideologies, ultimately evaluating its impact on social practices and relations.

At the final stage, we triangulated our findings via investigator triangulation. Investigator triangulation entails the involvement of two or more researchers in a study, facilitating diverse observations and conclusions that not only validate findings but also offer varied perspectives, thereby enhancing the comprehensiveness of the phenomenon under investigation (Carter et al., 2014). As such, excerpts of the analysis were reviewed by two external experts, who specialise in critical discursive approaches. In what follows we present our findings coupled with excerpts from the document that substantiate and justify our arguments.

Results

Our analysis indicates a distinctly neoliberal discursive landscape, formed by four main themes: "Prioritisation and Legitimisation of the Interests of the Market", "The Prioritisation and Hegemony of Productivity", "Ideological Hegemony of Neoliberal Positivism" and "Weaponisation of Equality and Inclusion to Promote Digitalisation". In what follows, we elaborate on the above and illustrate our arguments through representative excerpts from the Digital Strategy document, along with their micro-analysis.

The prioritisation and legitimisation of the interests of the market. Throughout the document, a recurring and predominant repertoire revolves around a discursive terrain focused on allocating, endorsing, and promoting the infusion of capital into the private sector. This includes governmental initiatives encouraging technological businesses' engagement or digital

Table 1 Steps of Critical Discourse Analysis.

Step	Process	Application and Example
1 Description	Description involves the textual analysis of the selected document, with a focus on the choice of words, grammar and structure of the text and its arguments. The focus is on identifying how language is used to construct meaning, as well as how word choices and structure may communicate certain underpinning ideologies. There is no definite list of devices that could be used, but typically these are: word order, word choice, voice (passive/active), tense, coherence (Mullet, 2018).	• Familiarisation with the document through multiple readings • High level notation to identify passages of relevance and interest • Micro-level analysis, highlighting word choices and structures (e.g., will+infinitive to express confidence and certainty of outcomes), choices between active/passive voice, references to citizens versus to industry. • Example: We highlight and coded excerpts such as "deep pools of capital" and "excellent funding ecosystem", "we understand", "critical importance".
2 Interpretation	Interpretation focuses on how the document may be or is interpreted by the intended audience, focusing specifically on said audience's prior experiences and knowledge. Macro-coding.	Using the examples provided above, we focused on identifying the intended audience of each of these examples, with the aim to explore possible hidden meanings. For instance, "deep pools of capital" are aimed at industry and market actors, with the intention to communicate that funding exists and can be made available to digital businesses. Further, other elements, such as "we understand", immediately followed by "critical importance" communicates interest alignment and expertise.
3 Explanation	Explanation moves Interpretation beyond the analysed document, where the latter is contextualised within the wider political and social context. It specifically entails examining power relations, ideological underpinnings, social structures, and tensions between different audiences and conflicting agendas and priorities. Macro-coding.	• Extensive review of relevant literature (e.g., Avgerou & Bonina, 2020; Cooper et al., 2021; Eubanks, 2018; Hustad et al., 2019; Mandelbaum, 2020; Vassilakopoulou & Hustad, 2023). • Contextualisation based on the review of auxiliary policy-related documents (e.g., Black et al., 2023; House of Lords, 2023; Tobin, 2023) and other relevant UK policies and strategies (DCMS, 2017; Department of Education, 2019; DHSC, 2021; DHSC and NHS, 2022; GOV.UK, 2013; HM Government, 2021). • Example: In the "Interpellation of citizens as national subjects" we discuss that the document portrays the UK as a digital powerhouse, where this status needs to be maintained, and that this requires further digitisation and investments in technology. This interpretation was confirmed and validated through the UK AI Strategy document (HM Government, 2021).
4 Review and production of chains of evidence	Review entails moving back and forth between the three previous steps, continuously refining the analysis via consultation, extended literature review and reading of other documents.	• Consultation between the authors to address discrepancies, differences and possible misinterpretations. • Relabelling of themes where needed. • Excerpts from the document were chosen as exemplars. • Developed chains of evidence and supplementary material (Supplementary Tables 1, 2, and Supplementary Fig. 1) • Findings triangulation (with 2 external experts in CDA)

corporations' requirements to actively participate in economic activities. This overarching construction is evident in discussions pertaining to diverse domains such as taxation, financial support, and academic research. Such rhetoric constructs corporate interests as hegemonic, while simultaneously underscoring the government's responsibility and attempts to foster technology-oriented business prosperity. As such, businesses' interests are frequently portrayed as factual, inherently common sense or shared societal interests aimed at bolstering the overall economy. The provided excerpt serves as an illustration of this perspective:

1 Any digital or technology concept needs capital to start up and grow. Funding across all stages of a
2 digital business lifecycle is an essential prerequisite of digital growth. The UK has deep pools of capital
3 and an excellent funding ecosystem for technology companies to use (p.56).

This repertoire is evident in the present excerpt, which delves into the imperative nature of capital for technological ventures. This excerpt is of analytical interest, as it frames the statement as a straight-forward fact. Its discursive function is to highlight the necessity of funding for digital business to grow and, based on what is worked up as necessity, to construct the UK as attractive due to funding, thus justifying and normalising the infusion of capital to the private sector. To legitimise this argument, the text presents businesses as akin to living beings with their own lifecycle who need capital to survive and grow, where the word "lifecycle" in line 2 personifies businesses, framing them as living beings, and "grow" has connotations that further supports this construction of businesses as living beings.

After "setting" the scene of the necessity for funding digital businesses, the document presents what is deemed as a solution. The UK is constructed as attractive due to possessing substantial capital and funding, via the metaphors "deep pool" and "excellent ecosystem" (lines 2–3). Metaphors serve the purpose of emphasising certain aspects while obscuring or masking others, often leading to an oversimplified portrayal that may overly streamline the differentiation between one category and another

(Wiggins, 2016). Here they are employed with an implication that companies could potentially use such funding, framed in an active voice, pronouncing their agency (Wiggins, 2016). Notably, the absences in the discursive terrain highlight the affordances of the "normative discourses"; what is the societally normalised and accepted rhetoric regarding certain topics (Smithson, 2000). In this excerpt and throughout the document, there are substantially fewer discussions regarding financing digitalisation efforts within the public sector. By framing digital concepts as requiring funding for expansion and concurrently referencing businesses, the text constructs a narrative wherein spending on digital technologies is depicted as hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971) and pivotal. Similar constructions can be noticed in the excerpts below, where Research & Development (R&D) is discussed:

1 We understand the critical importance of R&D in allowing businesses to gain competitive advantages,
2 create high-skilled jobs and boost national productivity (p.32).

1 We believe more can and should be done to unlock finance and stimulate innovation from high-tech
2 firms in the private sector. To incentivise the most innovative businesses in the tech sector and support
3 the use of cutting-edge computational R&D, we are expanding R&D tax reliefs to cover cloud
4 computing and data acquisition (p.32).

In the first excerpt, the phrase "we understand" is employed to convey a sense of expertise, further accentuated by "critical importance", creating a feeling of necessity. The construction of this necessity aims to highlight the significance of R&D in enhancing the well-being of businesses, further emphasised through a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) enumerating the benefits: gaining competitive advantages, creating high-skilled jobs, and boosting productivity. The second excerpt emphasises the legitimisation of utilising R&D to incentivise businesses. It presents an issue at stake, focusing on the need to stimulate innovation, followed by the proposed solution of tax reliefs outlined in the digital strategy. Like the previous excerpts, the government is positioned as understanding the importance of employing R&D to enhance businesses.

Interpellation of citizens as national subjects. Throughout the dataset, the readers finds themselves interpellated (Althusser, 1971) as national subjects. In many ways, the text rationalises and justifies the growing digitisation of diverse apparatuses and institutions using neoliberal discourses that emphasise the national interest. However, this neoliberal discourse, centred around the notion of the nation, is formed through ideologically complex, and often dilemmatic constructions (Billig, 1995). To be more precise, the document portrays the UK as a digital powerhouse, marked by a global level of prosperity. Nevertheless, this prosperity is also depicted as being in jeopardy, leading to the argument that increased digitisation and tech investment are essential to upholding the current status quo, contrasting with the prior portrayal of a global superpower. These rhetorical devices are employed interchangeably to justify the legitimacy of the document claims:

1 The UK Digital Strategy is a roadmap we will follow to strengthen our global position as a Science and
2 Tech Superpower. Our future prosperity and place in the world depends upon it (p.9).

1 The UK's tech sector is a valuable economic asset, generating jobs, growth and services which the
2 nation relies on (p.25).

The first excerpt legitimises the focus of the digital strategy, where suggestions made are presented as essential for the UK's standing within the global economic landscape. The digital strategy is depicted as a prerequisite for enhancing the nation's already robust position. However, the document also introduces a dilemma where the UK's global positioning and the nation's well-being depend on these activities. This construction creates a sense of urgency, antithetical to the image of the global superpower that is initially evoked. In the first excerpt, the metaphorical representation of the UK digital strategy as a roadmap (line 1) emphasises its imperative nature, and urging adherence (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This necessity is reinforced then through inclusive pronouns such as "we" (line 1) and "our" (line 2) fostering a sense of collective agreement (Wiggins, 2016). As such, while the UK is portrayed as a science and technology superpower, it is paradoxically characterised as requiring "strengthening" (line 1) introducing a dilemma regarding its power. The portrayal of the UK's technological prowess as a superpower serves to instil pride in the reader, positioned as part of the nation, while simultaneously implying that this status is at stake, further justifying the document's recommendations. Similar rhetorical strategies are evident in the second excerpt, where the national tech sector is framed using market terms ("asset", line 1). This characterisation is then evaluated through a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) (lines 1–2), arguing for a collective stake and shared interests (Edwards & Potter, 2005).

Moreover, the concept of the nation is strategically invoked to reinforce collective consensus. The reader, positioned as a national subject, is interpellated to perceive the technological corporate domain as something that works for their benefit. Throughout the document, the notion of the nation and national power is presented in a mundane way: a routine expression that subtly contributes to constructing a national identity (Billig, 1995).

1 A competitive and innovative digital economy will ensure the UK continues to be considered one of
2 the most innovative countries worldwide and a competitive environment where technology businesses
3 of all sizes can thrive (p.21).

This excerpt justifies the proposed digitalisation strategies as ensuring the national common good. The document emphasises the association of the digital economy with competitiveness and innovation, aligning with an ideological, neoliberal framework. The strategic deployment of "will" (line 1) sets the tone for a script (Edwards, 1994) that unfolds with the assurance of "ensuring" and "continuing" the UK's position as one of the most innovative countries worldwide. The repetition of the phrases "competitive and innovative" throughout the text, such as in "a competitive and innovative digital economy (line 1)", "one of the most innovative countries," and "a competitive environment" (lines 2-3), serves to equate the competitive and innovative digital economy with the overall global positioning of the UK (see Supplementary Table 2 for frequencies of selected words, and Supplementary Fig. 1 for a word cloud of the complete document). This repetition emphasises that it is the economy that defines the country's global standing where businesses "thrive". Thus, the digitalisation of the economy is depicted as crucial for supporting tech corporations, framing their support as a matter of financial, and national common sense. The conceptualisation of the technological emphasis involves aligning it with corporate values closely tied to the application of neoliberal market principles and the perceived efficiencies of market operations. Consequently, technology businesses are portrayed as pivotal elements in sustaining the nation's economy and overall well-being. What is not directly said but implied is that without attending to the digital economy's need to remain

competitive and innovative, there is a risk that the UK will not continue to be considered globally strong in terms of innovation. Ultimately, the ideological hegemony of neoliberalism is reinforced as common sense through the promotion of competitiveness as a positive trait, but the country's positioning is also at stake:

1 We are placing security at the heart of our approach,
because we know that a digital economy
2 whose security is assured provides the necessary stabi-
lity for continued growth, and further cements the UK's
3 position as a Science and Tech Superpower. Without
this core component, we risk undermining the
4 progress and innovation that sets our digital economy
apart (p.24).

The use of "our" serves to interpellate the individual as a national subject, fostering collective consensus. The concept of security is introduced in connection to the digital economy, accentuated by the phrase "we know" (lines 1–2) creating a sense of shared understanding and a scripted narrative (Edwards, 1994). The notion of the economy is portrayed as requiring safeguarding, and we again observe a dilemmatic construction, highlighting the need to "cement" (line 2) this position through the establishment of a secure digital economy (line 5). The core rhetorical function of this excerpt lies in the construction of risk: the lack of security in the economy is presented as undermining the progress and innovation of the national economy, which is emphasised as distinct. Here, the implied threat is the interruption of progress and innovation in the digital economy (Zinn, 2010).

Interpellation of workers as digital market stock. Another way that the digital strategy rationalises the proposed actions is by constructing the suggested changes to citizens' interests. Here, the proposed measures are framed as providing economic and overall prosperity for the average citizen, positioning individuals as workers. The main affordance available to citizens as well as the main beneficial position they can occupy is that of digital workers, that benefit from the wellbeing of digital businesses via the creation of jobs:

1 Estimates commissioned by the government suggest
that our approach to supporting and strengthening
2 the digital economy could grow the UK tech sector's
annual gross value added (GVA) by an additional
3 £41.5 billion by 2025, and create a further 678,000
jobs (p.5).

In the present excerpt, the document justifies investments by framing them as advantageous to the economy, creating more jobs, which, in turn, benefit individuals. The use of government estimates invoke expertise and strengthen the argument with evidence (Wiggins, 2016). This, in turn, is emphasised as generating a substantial number of jobs. The use of the words "supporting" and "strengthening" (line 1) the economy, frames such investments as a contribution to the entire economic framework. The construction presented suggests that corporations are negotiated as the entirety of the economy, drawing attention to the absence of other aspects such as a digitalised welfare state. In essence, the rhetorical function of this passage is to assert that the proposed strategies will be advantageous. However, the prevailing ideological hegemony of neoliberalism constrains the discursive possibilities of what is considered beneficial, limiting the discussion primarily to capital, jobs, and the portrayal of individuals as workers sustaining the economy. In many respects, the financial advantages suggested by these figures are utilised to manage stakes for the average individual. The absence of discourses that do not depict individuals beyond the scope of workers highlights the ideological hegemony of neoliberalism, where individuals are left to manage their own well-being within the framework of their employment:

1 Improving the availability of digital skills not only
unlocks the full economic potential of businesses, it
2 helps individuals and opens up careers in interesting,
sustainable, and well-paid jobs across the
3 economy (p.36).

In this excerpt, the primary objective is to align the interests of businesses with those of citizens. However, because citizens are exclusively framed as workers, they are perceived primarily in terms of productivity and their potential to contribute to capital. The employment of the concept of digital skills in line 1 is presented as unlocking the complete economic potential of businesses. This construction is followed by the interpellation of individuals, portrayed as recipients of a form of assistance (line 2) and beneficial outcomes; a construction worked up via a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) (interesting, sustainable, and well-paid, lines 2–3). Moreover, the notion of better working conditions further reinforces the ideological hegemony of the worker as a form of capital, whereas the only promises made to them are those constructing them as citizens via their labour and not via any human rights or other benefits. Indeed, the workers are not worked up as autonomous, but their working opportunities are constructed as a by-product of the businesses' unlocked economic potential.

The prioritisation and hegemony of productivity. Besides the institutions and apparatuses that are pronounced in terms of capital accumulation, in the present document, there was a substantial prioritisation of neoliberal values, productivity and innovation. Many of the strategies involved in the document are justified and legitimised based on such values, which are also constructed as factual and common sense, highlighting their dominance:

1 We are enabling better access to the benefits of digital
technologies across the whole of the UK,
2 improving productivity and inclusion by funding the
adoption of cutting-edge technologies by
3 businesses in every region to accelerate productivity
growth (p.7).

In the present excerpt, the government is worked up as facilitating "access" to the benefits of technology. The employment "whole" of the UK manages to work up an inclusive and convincing argument, which functions as a prelude to the employment of inclusion in line 3. This is justified based on the improvement of productivity. Productivity is a heavily neoliberal value, and perhaps this is why it is accompanied by inclusion (The weaponisation of equality and inclusion to promote digitalisation).

The legitimisation of the digital strategy is based on the need to improve productivity, whereby productivity is normalised as something that should be attained, and it is subtly setting it up as an outcome that is desired and thus requires funding. Technologies are employed to accelerate productivity growth in every region, further signposting to aspects and notions of inclusion and equality, whereby "the whole" of UK and the specification "in every region" seems to seek to balance the neoliberal discursive terrain.

1 Research shows that businesses that can use data
effectively are more likely to be productive in today's
2 digital-driven economy. In 2017, the publication of

Transport for London live data led to reduced
3 commute times and less congestion on public transport, by enabling the creation of more customer-
4 facing products. The safe availability of data also enables innovation and research (p.18).

The above excerpt legitimises what is described as 'effective data usage' by businesses for productivity and efficiency gains. The employment is based on the example of public transport and is further justified via research, which legitimises the argument presented by further invoking Transport for London data, i.e., building consensus via expertise (Wiggins, 2016). What is ultimately constructed as the goal is business productivity with some specific benefits, such as reduced commuting, and less congestion, thus completing the argument. We, therefore, posit that the excerpt serves to highlight that business productivity is indicative of the collective common good, via the employment of neoliberal values (Gramsci, 1971; LaMarre et al., 2018). Further to this, data availability is introduced as enabling innovation, and thus again constructed as common sense, that can solidify the hegemonic status quo:

1 A competitive and innovative digital economy will ensure the UK continues to be considered one of
2 the most innovative countries worldwide, and a competitive environment where technology businesses
3 of all sizes can thrive. To better support innovation within the UK's digital ecosystem, we are
4 establishing a groundbreaking pro-competition regime for digital markets. The new regime will deliver
5 lower prices for UK families, help entrepreneurs compete and grow, and give consumers more choice
6 and control over the services they use online. Boosting competition and innovation in digital markets
7 will increase productivity and encourage better-quality services for consumers and businesses alike
8 (p.21).

The present excerpt emphasises the necessity of neoliberal values, specifically competition and innovation, to justify its pro-competition regime. While employing various rhetorical devices, the primary focus of the analysis is on justifying the promotion of competition and innovation by suggesting that they will lead to increased productivity. However, competitiveness and innovation are conditional factors; these qualities characterise the UK's digital economy and ensure the maintenance of its global position. They are thus inherently crucial to the nation's well-being.

Ideological hegemony of neoliberal positivism. The document emphasises throughout a narrative around the imperative to cultivate STEM-related knowledge, commercialising it, or otherwise leveraging it to enhance financial benefits for the nation and businesses. The dominance of STEM positivism is consistently portrayed as common sense, often using performance-related rhetoric and the potential for applied economic generative capital, bestowing upon it a neoliberal and ideologically hegemonic status. This hegemony extends across various domains, with the government actively promoting and funding STEM-related initiatives, encouraging STEM-focused education, and altering curricula to prioritise STEM-related subjects (Evans, 2023). All these efforts are presented as a prelude to an economy predominantly oriented towards STEM disciplines:

1 We can also support innovative businesses, particularly those in areas such as quantum computing
2 technology and AI, by ensuring there is adequate provision of, and access to, large-scale, high-
3 performance computing. The £210 million Hartree Centre in Warrington exemplifies the potential for
4 this approach to stimulate innovation and create value for partner organisations, by accelerating the
5 adoption of high-performance computing, big data and cognitive technologies (p.32).

The action-oriented element justifies the substantial funding for activities such as the Hartree Centre through performance-related rhetoric. In addition, there is an implied call to action to prioritise and invest in large-scale, high-performance computing to support the specified innovative industries. In this above excerpt, quantum computing technology and artificial intelligence are portrayed as innovative, emphasising the necessity to ensure and adequately access them. The substantial value of the Hartree Centre (line 3) is justified by its potential (and the country's need) to foster innovation, and the adoption of STEM-related tools is then presented as needing acceleration, creating a sense of urgency within the discourse. The positivist construction is further developed through a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) that includes highly digitalised STEM areas such as computing, big data, and cognitive technologies. A similar construction pertaining to education can be observed in the excerpt below:

1 Improving digital education in schools, and increasing undergraduate numbers in Science, Technology,
2 Engineering and Mathematics (STEM subjects), will raise the base level of skills of the next generations
3 to enter the workforce.

4 We have already taken positive steps in this area. England was (as part of the UK) one of the first G20
5 countries to introduce coding into the primary curriculum. Each year, 77,000 pupils take Computer
6 Science GCSEs, over 12,000 pupils take Computer Science A levels, and 85,000 students take
7 Computer Science undergraduate degrees. We want to encourage the uptake of both GCSE and A-Level
8 Computer Science, sustaining its status as a vital STEM subject.

9 As such, the Department for Education (DfE) will continue to support schools to deliver computing
10 alongside a full range of subjects over the course of a week. The benefits of a broad and balanced
11 curriculum are widespread, including giving pupils the necessary skills and development opportunities
12 to succeed in later life and access jobs in important growth sectors such as digital (pp.36-37).

Here, the document emphasises the importance of improving digital education in schools and increasing the number of STEM undergraduates as crucial for the next generation of workers, focusing specifically on digital "upskilling". The implicit suggestion is that the job market will undergo a transformation, and the excerpt crafts an image of the future needs of the labour market and subtly conveys what is at stake. The introduction of coding is presented as a global initiative, illustrating the prevalence of students engaging in STEM subjects as part of their formal education, bolstered by numerical data to lend legitimacy to the argument.

The document also sets the stage for the invocation of expertise, particularly from the Department for Education, which is framed as providing continued support for these subjects (line 9). Computer science is portrayed as part of a balanced and broad curriculum, presented as a means of equipping students with necessary skills and opportunities; the absence of other modules further pronounces the ideological hegemony of positivism, as it

highlights the lack of affordances for other education aspects that are not perceived as financially "productive". This framing is further legitimised through the scripted narrative that STEM emphasis will contribute to students' success, with the digital sector characterised as important and poised for growth, as shown below, whereby STEM lessons are described as crucial, of government-backed significance and the document appeals to readers by showcasing the potential for jobs, funding, and wage outcomes through highly marketable and quantitative subjects, further accentuated by "fast track" and "direct route" employment strategies, promising quick access to opportunities:

1 As part of Skills for Life, the government has launched Skills Bootcamps in England, which offer free,
2 flexible courses lasting up to 16 weeks. Skills Bootcamps include areas such as software development,
3 digital marketing, and data analytics. With a fast track to interview, this training offers a direct route to
4 digital or technical roles for participants. In the financial year 2021/22, up to 16,000 people participated
5 in a Skills Bootcamp. DfE is significantly scaling up delivery in 2022/23, with up to £150 million of
6 additional funding (p.42).

The weaponisation of equality and inclusion to promote digitalisation. Throughout the document, a recurring theme centres on the promotion of "inclusion". The emphasis on inclusion is constructed within two main discursive domains: first, enabling individuals from minority backgrounds to actively participate in the economy as workers, and second, providing opportunities for businesses of various sizes. The document consistently presents capital investment in businesses to foster inclusivity and uphold values such as openness. The following excerpt illustrates this perspective:

1 This is supported by the Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund, which is investing over £500 million
2 to boost small and medium businesses across the north of England. No one, and no place, should be left
3 behind (p.7)

The present excerpt manages to justify the significant investment to northern businesses and make this investment appear as an attempt to promote inclusion. It discusses investment fund designed for small and medium-sized businesses, with a notable emphasis on the geographical context (line 2); what is not directly said, but is perhaps implied, is the impact of the North-South divide, which affects businesses, whereby the North is less affluent and characterised by worse outcomes across several indices when compared to the South (Burton, 2021). Along these lines, the message communicated is that both small and medium businesses and the northern regions are often overlooked, reflecting a bifurcation in UK geopolitics. The deliberate choice of language, such as "left behind" in lines 2-3 contributes to a discourse promoting inclusivity, underscoring the need for attention to entities that might have been neglected to date. Furthermore, the use of the term "no one", while ostensibly referring to corporations, subtly personifies them, contributing to a script of equality within the discourse. Perhaps the aim is to employ inclusivity rhetoric to justify the substantial investment to businesses when the North is characterised by significant needs in terms of the welfare state:

1 The third sector also has a number of initiatives to support digital upskilling. Code Your Future targets
2 refugees and disadvantaged people by testing if they are suitable for a coding role. If they pass, they are
3 offered a Full Stack course with a tailored job upon completion of the course (p.45).

The incorporation of the third sector in the text serves to balance the prioritisation of corporate interests that has been prevalent throughout the document, or to further legitimise the inclusion rhetoric by associating the third sector with societal assistance. The emphasis on providing opportunities for refugees and disadvantaged individuals suggests a social impact orientation, extending beyond mere skill development to contribute to broader societal goals of inclusion and empowerment. However, this inclusivity is conditional, as indicated by the term "testing" (line 2). The individuals targeted receive the course only if deemed suitable, and a job is contingent on completing the course. Notably, the digitalisation of work-related skills is framed as upskilling (line 1), presenting it as an enhancement or expansion of existing skillsets, reinforcing the ideological dominance of technological neoliberalism. As such, the rhetorical construction of the inclusion of disadvantaged groups is presented as conditional; they are framed as labour resources, and their upskilling is subject to their suitability for a coding role.

Similar constructions can be observed below:

1 (…) Include a more diverse range of candidates in industry's vision of the digital workforce. Too many
2 recruiters have high expectations of the ready-made skills they can 'buy in'. The lack of diversity in the
3 UK's digital workforce is hampering digital growth by excluding potential workers and consumers from
4 the sector's development. DCMS will work with industry to promote diverse and inclusive recruitment
5 and retention practices within the industry, and ensure that people from a wide range of ethnic
6 and socioeconomic backgrounds are encouraged into digital roles (p.46).

The action orientation of this excerpt is to justify upskilling as a form of diversity that will benefit individuals from a range of backgrounds. Despite the inclusion rhetoric, diversity-related initiatives are coined as "the industry's vision" (line 1) of the workforce. Recruiters are portrayed as potential contributors to the problem due to having "high" expectations and wanting pre-existing skills; as such, the issue becomes one of individual actions rather than a systemic problem, which is in turn however construed as hampering digital growth (line 3). In other words, individuals are interpellated as active market and consumption participants, and primarily as workers and consumers (line 3), whereby their (only) role is to facilitate market operations by offering their labour. The discourse further seems to promote equality and inclusivity by highlighting the importance of incorporating individuals from various ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds via "recruitment" and "retention". Lack of diversity is framed as challenging, not due to how it affects individuals of minority status but due to the impact on the market ("hampering digital growth" in line 3" sector's development" in line 4). As such, the strategy, when it comes to diverse minoritized individuals and social groups positions them as being responsible for taking action, and as needing additional support, rather than considering any structural barriers in terms of them entering and thriving in the education system and later the labour market (Owens & de St Croix, 2020).

Discussion

Throughout the 2022 UK Digital Strategy, the narrative that emerges reveals the pervasive influence of neoliberal ideology in technology. Within the document, technology is employed to further advance neoliberal goals related to the market. This is

discursively achieved by highlighting the active reinforcement of technological neoliberalism as ideologically hegemonic. Yet, little to no emphasis is given to the persistent digital inequalities that operate within the UK. Our analysis illustrates four themes: (a) Prioritisation and Legitimisation of the Interests of the Market, (b) The Prioritisation and Hegemony of Productivity, (c) Ideological Hegemony of Neoliberal Positivism; and (d) Weaponisation of Equality and Inclusion to Promote Digitalisation.

The repertoire of **Prioritisation and Legitimisation of the Interests of the Market**, establishes a discursive framework centred on the accumulation of capital and profit within the private sector and businesses. Wellbeing is understood solely as employment opportunities in the digital economy, where the focus remains on capital infusion in the private sector and the imperative for everyone to actively engage in economic activities. Such rhetoric portrays therefore techno-liberalism as hegemonic, unavoidable and common sense, much like taxes and the taxation system (Carr et al., 2019). Further expanding on this, however, we also observe that the 'new' promise of digitalisation functions for the prioritisation of the wellbeing of the business sector, without observing digital inequalities within the UK society. While digitalisation is conventionally linked with expectations of technological advancements leading to prosperity, efficiency, and inclusivity (Neubauer, 2011; Petersen et al., 2019), the Strategy throughout centres on businesses, rather than society or the public sector. Similarly, the Strategy does not contain any reflections on the root causes of digital inequalities, nor the implications of said inequalities within the context of compounding and resulting in further disadvantages for digitally excluded individuals. As such, one could argue that the neoliberal capitalism is, as Waters (2020) argued, in terminal crisis, where digital and technology businesses have a crucial role to support it.

However, these discourses are intricate and involve complex ideological constructions. As mentioned, the UK is portrayed as a digital powerhouse experiencing global prosperity but also facing potential risks to that prosperity. It is at this juncture that digital inequalities seem to be a policy concern, i.e., they are framed as a potential risk. To mitigate against this, policy frames citizens as **national subjects**, who need to align with the requirements of the digital economy and the necessity of increased digitisation and technological investment to maintain the current national status quo. Rhetorical devices here are used to justify the legitimacy of the claims and further invoke the nation and reader's national identity. Throughout the discursive terrain, constructions of the nation are presented in mundane ways. In many cases, such constructions can be viewed through the common sense logic (Gramsci, 1971), but also through the 'banal nationalism' lens (Billig, 1995) which refers to the subtle and everyday expressions of nationalism that are so commonplace that people often overlook them. Unlike other forms of nationalism, banal nationalism operates on a routine level, involving ideologies ingrained in ordinary practices, objects, and language. Such constructions are expected to an extent, as countries and nations compete against each other (Wang, 2020). To the extent, however, that this involves citizens, their interpellation as national subjects (Mandelbaum, 2020) leads to a consensus around shared consciousness that justifies positioning them as accountable to the government's agenda. In other words, citizens are expected to have or develop the required digital skills, and overcome the obstacles toward their digital inclusion, specifically for supporting the UK's efforts toward becoming a digital powerhouse. However, structural barriers that lead to digital inequalities (such as lack of infrastructure, socioeconomic status, and place-based exclusions) (Zamani & Vannini, 2022) are not addressed.

Yet, and despite the above, citizens are interpellated as **digital workers**. The digital strategy justified its proposed actions by framing changes to citizens' interests as promoting economic prosperity. Despite the emphasis on neoliberal values and prioritising technological corporations, the suggested measures are presented as beneficial for the average citizen, positioning them as digital workers who contribute to the well-being of digital businesses by developing their digital skills portfolio for the purposes of securing a job and supporting the market, rather than for their own benefit and digital inclusion. The promise of the revitalisation of economies via the creation of jobs is a discourse employed in various industries e.g., gas industry (Cantoni et al., 2018). However, the idea that workers must orient themselves according to the needs of the market echoes the concept of alienation (Cooper et al., 2021): under capitalistic labour conditions, labour is a commodity and workers become alienated from the process and the products of their own labour, exactly because they lack agency in the production decisions (Healy, 2020). Along these lines, we observe that this interpellation shares similarities to recent trends, including liquid work (Marjanovic & Murthy, 2021) and the connexionist world of work (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018), whereby workers are expected to be available at a moment's notice, hired and fired on a needs-basis, and able to work across places, teams, projects and time zones, according to the needs of the market, rather than their own. While such work modalities tend to be glamourised, in reality they merely facilitate precarious employment contracts (Aroles et al., 2020) and further result in "adverse digital incorporation" (Heeks, 2021, p. 766), where the industry's focus on cutting-edge technologies, and " the dominance of technological innovation and the pressure to adopt newer technologies continue to prevail" (Imran, 2023, p. 5). In other words, the motivation does not seem to relate to the ways in which digital inclusion can combat some of the other inequalities that disadvantage individuals (e.g., lack of healthcare access, fewer job opportunities) and break the sequentiality of digital inequalities (Van Deursen et al., 2017), but rather as a means to create more digital workers for the digital economy.

Closely related to the above are two other emerging repertoires: **"The Prioritisation and Hegemony of Productivity" and "Ideological Hegemony of Neoliberal Positivism"**. Productivity, and the continuous pursuit for it, is portrayed as common sense, and further underpinned by the prioritisation of neoliberal values, such as power and capital accumulation (Waters, 2020). As such, the pursuit of these justify many of the outlined initiatives in the Strategy, and specifically those centred on efficiencies and innovation, as these two are often seen as requirements for productivity (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018). Against this background, individualism is prioritised, whereby the discourse suggests that the productive self is the desired state, and that it can be achieved through continuous engagement in work (LaMarre et al., 2018). Crucially, such framing suggests that lack of productivity is challenging the system, without acknowledging numerous social factors that may contribute to the absence of productivity. Indeed, a diverse range of social and personal factors may be implicated in one's digital exclusion (e.g., gender, socioeconomic status, faith, place) which may result in reduced productivity, but here the assumption is that individuals are responsible for their own circumstances (and this includes their relative positioning to the digital world), and thus by extension, they are also responsible for their reduced productivity (LaMarre et al., 2018).

At the same time, we observe that discourses on productivity further relate to those of neoliberal positivism and its hegemonic nature. Throughout the document, STEM education and STEM-orientated initiatives are presented as a necessity, but exclusively for supporting productivity and market and business needs. The narrative that emerges is thus that of cultivating and commercialising STEM-related knowledge for financial benefits, and its dominance is enhanced through performance-related capital

generation rhetoric. In doing so, the Strategy legitimises funding directed to STEM education, and indirectly the cuts in the funding of Social sciences, Arts and Humanities (Lake, 2022). This is not exclusive of course to the UK. Hoeg and Bencze (2017) highlight that this is the case in the USA, too, where government intervention to promote entrepreneurial behaviours through market mechanisms connects with science in ways that raise concerns about prioritising profit over public good and scholarship, and where scientific research aligns with national economic interests, global competitiveness and national wealth. In Australia, too, Wardman (2016) argues education is leveraged for serving the national economy by producing standardized workers capable of moving seamlessly between workplaces.

Against the backdrop of the above repertoires, our analysis shows the weaponisation of the principles of **equality and inclusion** to legitimise digitalisation, constructed within two discursive domains. First, digitalisation is framed as 'enabling' minoritised people to partake in the economy as workers, within an upskilled job market. Such a framing echoes neoliberal feminism's emphasis on individualisation and personal responsibility while ignoring systemic factors and structural barriers (Asmar et al., 2022; Rottenberg, 2017; Van Deursen et al., 2017). It also aligns with the operationalisation of individuals as untapped economic resources, often found in public figures' and politicians' speeches (Dangoisse & Perdomo, 2021). Second, the document consistently presents capital investment in businesses as promoting inclusivity, i.e., investments are considered as efforts to include in the economy more diverse businesses (small, medium, large), but not citizens. Indeed, this is a popular discourse in neoliberal agendas, where individuals are presented as consumers and as entrepreneurs, but rarely citizens, and who need to be autonomous and able to manage their own wellbeing. Yet, such framings obscure the structural foundations of collective issues, and focus almost exclusively on profitability and productivity (Dangoisse & Perdomo, 2021).

Conclusions

In this study, we have analysed the recent UK Digital Strategy through a critical discourse analysis. Our aim was to emphasise the significant impact of political rhetoric, particularly when emanating from powerful government positions. Through our analysis, we have highlighted how policy seeks to exert influence and control in the forming of values, beliefs and norms through the dissemination of ideas and practices that function to reinforce existing power structures. Within the realm of the public sector, this is particularly critical as institutions, like education, seem to play a crucial role in validating such claims, and projects, such as the digitalisation of public services are framed as common sense and unquestionably beneficial and inclusive.

Within the Social Sciences, and at the intersection of politics, digitalisation and the public sector, scholars have shown a long-standing interest on various countries' digital strategies. Very often, however, the focus seems to be around issues relating to slow implementation (e.g., Edelmann & Mergel, 2022), poor performance outcomes (e.g., Venkateswaran & Jyotishi, 2017) or prioritisation of objectives and their linkages to productivity and growth (e.g., Priharsari et al., 2023). On the other flank, however, there is a substantial body of literature that has been emphasising the societal implications of digitalisation, both positive and negative (the provision of tele-healthcare for remote and rural areas, for example, as a government initiative and public service) (Ishfaq & Raja, 2015), as well as discussing the ways in which digitalisation makes more visible and reinforces existing inequalities (Van Deursen et al., 2017). Our study contributes to this space by bringing together and jointly examining the two aspects mentioned above, by interrogating the underlining assumptions and underpinnings of a government digital strategy. We believe this to be an important contribution to the literature of power, politics and digitalisation, and to the extent these intersect with the welfare state. It has been argued that it is difficult to convincingly link actual consequences of digitalisation on citizens and especially those most vulnerable, because such consequences can also be the result of "the often contingent, contradictory, and unpredictably messy nature of state practices" (Sheldrick, 2023, p. 8). Such contradictions may further emerge due to an overall prevailing austerity climate, as the one in the UK, and due to the substantial reduction in funding for the public sector and particularly its welfare function. Our findings however show that the above unfold alongside the prioritisation of corporate interests. Thus, while the published Digital Strategy is seemingly at times geared towards inclusivity, in essence, it becomes more performative than substantively constructive. Therefore, we posit that in either case, these effects are by design as a market logic dominates over the government strategy.

We join our voices with other scholars (e.g., Avgerou & Bonina, 2020; Masiero, 2023) to challenge the often uncontested claims regarding the benefits and productivity gains of digital transformation endeavours, national digital strategies and the underpinning ideologies that produce them. We rather posit that such endeavours are primarily rooted in a broader shift towards global capitalism, whereby claims and arguments around universally experienced benefits are treated as an ideological cover for deepening inequalities and the consolidation of capital and power (Neubauer, 2011), whereby technology and digitalisation projects function as facilitators and accelerators of consolidation. We wish to highlight that often, the role of technology in digital strategies seems to be reduced to simply prioritising technology-enabled solutions or creating false urgencies, rather than leveraged constructively for addressing root causes and structural barriers. In other words, technology all too often seems to function as a convenient distraction from long-standing socio-economic problems.

Like all studies, ours too comes with certain limitations. First, we focused our analysis exclusively on the 2022 UK Digital Strategy, i.e., a single document that introduces the strategy of a single government. Conducting CDA on a single document is not unusual: Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2023), for example, analysed the inauguration speech of Joe Biden, to explore his political aims and attitudes while taking over the US presidential office. In our case, our purpose was to explain how hegemonic knowledge is constructed and maintained through institutional discourses, particularly governmental ones, which wield significant power in relation to material conditions, whereby the above come into conflict with realities on the grounds. In other words, we sought to "tease out the assumptions of the document so that they can be questioned" (McBride & Stahl, 2010, p. 245). In line with CDA, our study does not aim for generalisation, as it is using a single case. Having said that, rather than aiming for broad applicability and generalisability, our study examines and evaluates how discourse, grounded in material and symbolic contexts, reproduces hegemonic values (Fairclough (2012)).

Future research, however, could consider this document against others, and over the longer term. For example, a close examination of this document against other policy documents that aim at operationalising the Strategy across the public sector (e.g., how ambitions and directions expressed in the Digital Strategy were translated and operationalised in terms of contracting and sourcing technology projects and programmes (HM Government, 2023)) can be particularly interesting for identifying differences in its interpretation by different departments and offices. We also see value in longitudinal studies that trace the

changes that may have occurred or will occur within the UK because of this strategy, to formally and directly address changes in the welfare state and improvements in productivity.

As a final point, we highlight that the 2022 UK Digital Strategy has been the product of the Conservative Government (2019–2022 Johnson Conservative Government); as such, it reflects exclusively the values and priorities of that government. The 2024 elections resulted in a Labour Government. While no specific plans have been announced to date by the new government in relation to the Digital Strategy, it is worth mentioning that, the King's Speech, i.e., the speech that announces the legislation programme for the next parliamentary session, does make similar references to technologies within the context of investments, skills and the country's position on the global stage (King Charles, 2024). If the new government produces a new Digital Strategy, it would therefore be interesting to explore similarities and differences in this institutional discourse, and whether and how priorities and the dominant ideology in terms of digitalisation change.

Data availability

All data analysed in this study are included in the article and are available here: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uks-digital-strategy/uk-digital-strategy.

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Author contributions

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Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to Efpraxia D. Zamani.

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