Connect_
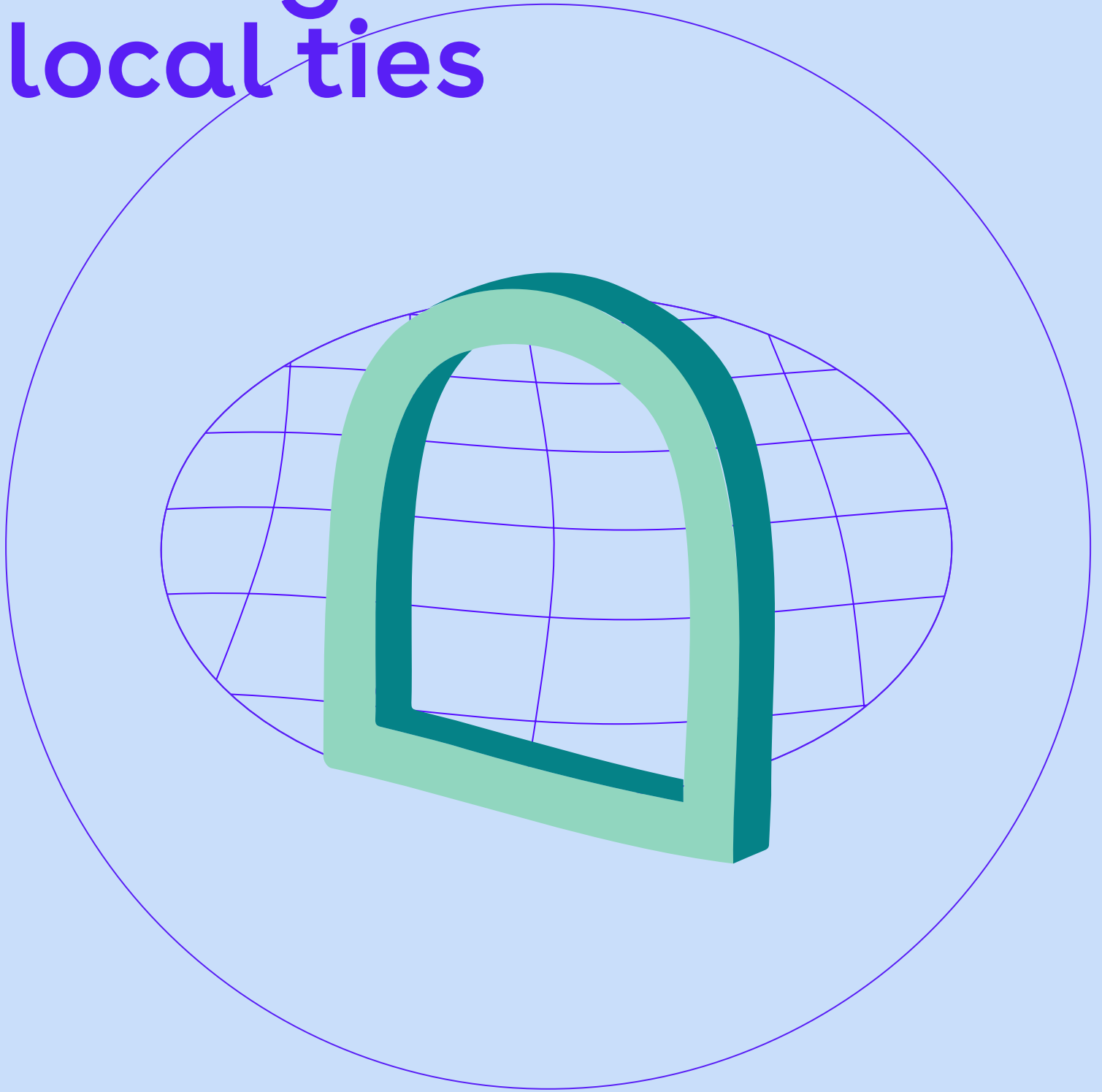# Strengthen local ties

This signal is part of Civic Signals, a larger framework to help create better digital public spaces. We believe it's a platform's responsibility to design the conditions that promote ideal digital public spaces. Such spaces should be designed to help people feel Welcome, to Connect, to Understand and to Act. These four categories encompass the 14 Civic Signals.

Table of contents

At a glance

Local ties mean emotional, structural, communicative, and to some extent participative ties to physical places and the communities associated with them.

Why It Matters

Local connection increases civic engagement, leads to better health, improves public safety, and satisfies critical information needs. Strong local information provision is important for disaster preparedness and provides crucial resources for decision-making.
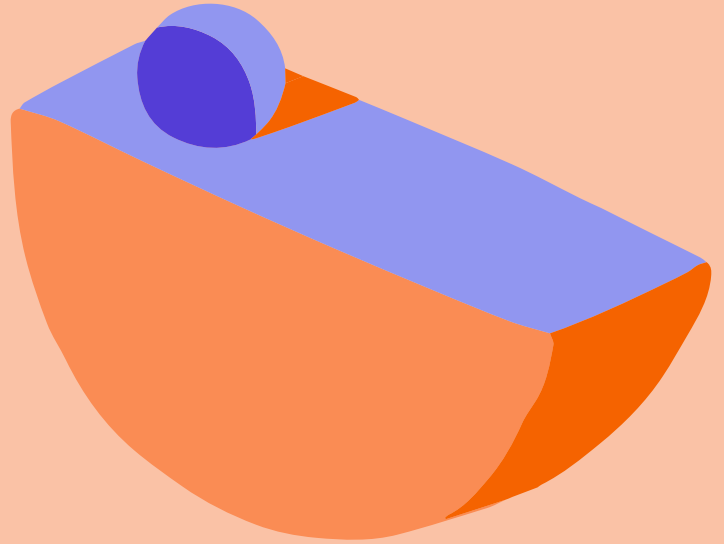
> **"** *So you will know I can't use Main Reef Road going home because there is a service delivery happening... I will know from here which is a safe route to take." – Thabang, South African focus group participant*

Putting the Signal Into Practice

- The design of platforms for local connections must include mechanisms to prevent abuse, racial profiling, and suspicion in communities. After sustained criticism, Nextdoor recently announced policies to address these issues: https://go.us.nextdoor.com/safety/preventing-profiling

- The proposed "Journalism Competition and Preservation Act" would create safe harbor from antitrust laws if local news outlets across the country were to band together to increase their negotiating power with big technology companies. https://cicilline.house.gov/sites/cicilline.house.gov/files/documents/JournalismCompetitionPreservation_0.pdf

- Australia is forcing tech companies to pay publishers, and France and Germany were expected to roll out similar requirements. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/10/business/media/big-tech-has-crushed-the-news-business-thats-about-to-change.html

- Some are calling for a 1% tax on platforms to fund independent and nonprofit newsrooms, especially local and investigative reporting. https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/the-problem-with-our-media-is-extreme-commercialism/

- Google announced a licensing program to pay news outlets, including local ones, for their content. In some cases Google will pay so that users can access paywalled content for free. https://www.blog.google/outreach-initiatives/google-news-initiative/licensing-program-support-news-industry-/

Literature review

By Martin Riedl,
Center for Media Engagement
With thanks to Christopher Ali,
University of Virginia

What the Signal Is

We conceive of local connection as emotional, structural, and to some extent participative ties to physical places and the communities associated with them. In defining local connection, we build on a rich literature in environmental psychology, communication, and sociology.

First, we consider the notion of place attachment by psychologists Irvin Altman and Setha Low, who conceived of it as both bonding with places and the importance that people attribute to places, similar to what other scholars have referred to as a "sense of place." Psychologists Leila Scannell and Robert Gifford summarized existing literature on place attachment and identified three main organizing principles: Firstly, a personal level relates to "who" is attached. Secondly, the psychological process level (emotion, thinking, and behavior) relates to "how" one is attached, and thirdly, the spatial level relates to "where" one is attached. Attachment to a local community, as psychologists Stephanie Riger and Paul Lavrakas wrote, consists of the dimensions of "social bonding and behavioral rooted-ness." In a similar fashion, communication professor Sandra Ball-Rokeach and colleagues described neighborhood belonging as "subjective and objective attachment to

the neighborhood, both what individuals do with their neighbors and how they feel about their neighbors."

We want to acknowledge the multi-faceted nature of "local" and "place," and the work of scholars such as geographer Doreen Massey, who argued that "place" is formed by intense social relationships rather than by geography. For our purposes, we mainly refer to "local" and "place" in a geographic sense.

In this vein, another approach to local connection from which we draw stems from scholarship on social capital, a term used to describe the networks and relationships that form the social fabric of society. Sociologist Barry Wellman and colleagues argued that there are three different forms of social capital: network capital, which consists of the relationships among close-knit individuals; participatory capital, which is being involved in voluntary work and politics; and community commitment, a sense of belonging toward a community. We concentrate here on community commitment. Participatory capital is covered by another Civic Signal, that of Support Civic Action.

Members of local communities have both strong and weak ties, with the former including familial and friendship bonds and the latter including acquaintances and less established connections. The model based on these concepts, described by sociologist Mark Granovetter, posited that weak ties among people are important for community integration, and strong ties are important for local cohesion; however, strong ties may also limit the scope of networks and thus enable fragmentation. Researchers such as anthropologist Susan Greenbaum, however, have found contradictory evidence, suggesting that stronger ties do not fragment

communities on a neighborhood level. We propose that a network of both strong and weak ties within a local community is an essential part of local connection. Such a network necessarily consists of a variety of interpersonal relationships of close and loose ties, but must also be supplemented by organizations and structures that provide news and information.

Related Concepts

Local connection shares features with several related concepts. Community integration is an adjacent notion; political science professor Jack McLeod and colleagues argued that, on an individual level, community integration starts "with a positive regard for the local community, respect for its institutions, and concern for its problems."

Localism, or a connectedness to and with the local, is another closely related concept. Communication policy scholar Christopher Ali has pointed to a duality of localisms: Localism of a spatial nature and localism of a social nature. These terms mean that people can be in and of a community that is bound by place, or a community that is bound by a shared set of interests – especially in a world that is resembling, in media theorist Marshall McLuhan's words, a "global village." What ought to be considered "local" is an inherently subjective enterprise; author Taiye Selasi, for example, argued that instead of asking where people are from, it may be more productive and meaningful to ask people where they are a "local." Media and journalism scholars Kristy Hess and Lisa Waller referred to the dual role of local news media as "geo-social," meaning that while these outlets are firmly rooted in geography, they also convey social functions that

extend beyond the spatial, and might cater to people in other, remote, places that share interest or kinship with the outlet's target location.

For the signal of local connection, we are chiefly interested in localism that pertains to the physically local, rather than a remote and abstract sense of kinship with others in different places. For example, spatial localism in the domain of media policy serves to justify why certain media outlets are mandated to carry local programming. On a more abstract level, spatial localism also feeds into the notion that some people care and are deeply affiliated with their immediate polities, perhaps at times even more so than with the federal government. For more on kinship with others that is not bound by place, see our signal Cultivate Belonging.

Why It's Important

Local connection is vital because, among other benefits, it improves civic engagement, addresses health issues, improves public safety, and satisfies critical information needs.

Environmental psychologists Leila Scannell and Robert Gifford summarized literature on place attachment, writing that being connected to a place provides safety and allows people to pursue their goals in a manner that doesn't bring about sudden change. Another Scannell and Gifford study surfaced beneficial aspects of place attachment such as connection to memories, belonging, and relaxation, as well as positive emotions and support for activities.
Local connection can also have positive associations with civic participation, such as getting involved in local politics or

volunteering. In an interview study on environmental risks in an industrial neighborhood in Hamilton, Ontario, geography and health studies professor Sarah Wakefield and her colleagues reported that social capital and place attachment might best be understood as prerequisites for civic participation. Psychologist Anna Stefaniak and colleagues found that, for a sample of Polish students, learning about local history increased place attachment, which then positively affected civic engagement, measured through a desire to engage in one's community and to share one's newfound knowledge. Place attachment also plays a crucial role in environmental justice activists' work on "remaking place for residents" in marginalized neighborhoods, as urban and environmental planning professor Isabelle Anguelovski described initiatives in Barcelona, Boston, and Havana.

Failure of local connection, particularly neighborhood connectedness, can at times also lead to dire outcomes. One such example is illustrated by sociologist Eric Klinenberg, who explored the deadly Chicago heat wave of 1995. Effectively, Klinenberg argued that "shoddy social infrastructure discouraged interaction and impeded mutual support," which led to more deaths in one neighborhood than in another.

Local connection matters, too, in understanding health literacy as a communicative and community issue, as suggested by communication professor Yong-Chan Kim and his colleagues. Their research defined health literacy as a community's ability to provide access to health information and assistance that can form the basis for health-related decisions. Communication professor Holley A. Wilkin and colleagues wrote that in neighborhoods with close-knit information ecologies, "positive health

outcomes are experienced at both the individual and community level." A study by health and technology scholar Eleanor Burgess and colleagues showed that so-called "communication hotspots" have the potential to affect people's health-related social capital. A diverse local network of contacts with which to discuss health-related issues is important for making health-related decisions.

Local connection through meaningful information infrastructures is also important for disaster preparedness. Yong-Chan Kim, together with colleague Jinae Kang, found that the extent to which someone is connected and integrated into a storytelling network as outlined above can positively affect their "likelihood of engaging in preparedness activities before and during a hurricane." You can read more about the importance of information to disaster preparedness in our literature reviews on Boost Community Resilience and Show Reliable Information. Our point here is that local connection can facilitate disaster preparedness.

One sophisticated approach to studying local connection and illustrating its crucial importance was developed by communication professor Sandra Ball-Rokeach and her students at the University of Southern California. The framework centers on communication infrastructure, or the communicative action enabled by "neighborhood storytelling networks." Such storytelling occurs in both formal and informal settings, including town halls, local media, and conversations among neighbors. In a similar approach, journalism and communication professor Lewis A. Friedland introduced the concept of a "communicatively integrated community." For a community to flourish, it is necessary to have a variety of different communicative

elements and structures, and integration among them, such as interpersonal communication, local and neighborhood news, but also national legacy media organizations.

Much of the benefit of local connection comes through the provision and use of local information. For example, Friedland and colleagues wrote that in order to lead healthy and safe lives and to participate democratically, people need access to certain information, in what they summarize as a set of "critical information needs." This includes information on emergencies, health and welfare, education, transportation, economic opportunities, the environment, civics, and politics. Many of these details are local in nature.

Although local news features prominently in many definitions of local connection and is societally important for delivering critical information, its production is on a steady decline. Even in places where there is local news, these outlets don't always cover their local area. In a 2019 study by the Pew Research Center, almost half of the Americans surveyed said that their local media "mostly cover another area, such as a nearby city." The continuous shrinking of editorial offices and reporting staff is accompanied by severe consequences for local communities: As former executive editor of *The Washington Post*, Leonard Downie, Jr., and Michael Schudson, a journalism professor and sociologist wrote, shifts affecting the downsizing of newsroom have severe repercussions, "particularly in the coverage of local affairs."
Other students of local news ecosystems such as communication professor Matt Hindman have established that, amidst hopes and expectations that hyperlocal news delivered via the internet might counter a decline in local print news, the "story

of hyperlocal journalism thus far is mostly a long list of failed experiments." Hindman finds that news markets are highly concentrated, and local news only accounts for a miniscule share of overall news.

In 2020, a study by journalism researcher Penelope Muse Abernathy examined the rise of so-called "news deserts," areas in the United States where communities completely lost coverage by local news organizations. The report found that over the past 15 years, more than 25% of papers in the country closed up shop, leaving many communities without this important source of news. Local news is one way in which local connection can be established.

How We Can Move the Needle

Local connection can be addressed by providing citizens with meaningful tools to learn about and participate in their local communities. Local information is key in maintaining and strengthening local ties.

Online neighborhood forums have merits in bringing neighbors together for participative, deliberative processes or to solicit input on decisions. For example, urban planning and environmental design researchers Nader Afzalan and Brian Muller investigated a neighborhood online forum in Eugene, Oregon, and studied neighbors' use of the forum to discuss the site of a new park. The online forum was helpful in allowing for deliberation and discussion, but it also allowed people to spread misinformation. Discussion lists at the neighborhood level have repeatedly been found to be helpful tools of community participation – including in early studies, such as by communication and sociology

scholars Keith Hampton and Barry Wellman in 2003. In some areas, neighborhood forums and hyperlocal journalism are tasked with sustaining participation and contributions by neighbors.

Neighborhood apps and platforms need to be carefully designed with community participation and openness in mind. For example, the neighborhood social media platform Nextdoor has allowed neighbors to connect in new ways. Yet the platform also has seen racial profiling emerge. This conjures up comparisons with redlining, or maintaining inequalities through delimiting neighborhoods online, wrote American history scholar Katie Lambright. The delineations made to form communities are both inclusionary and exclusionary. Therefore, people who facilitate and create online neighborhood communities should consider mechanisms to engage minority and low-income communities, rather than reinforcing exclusion. Makers of platforms should be very aware that, whatever their imagined target audience may be, they must bake inclusionary affordances into these platforms to bring together diverse local communities rather than propagating stratification and disconnect. The design of platforms for local connections must include mechanisms of checks and balances that prevent abuse, racial profiling, and suspicion in communities.

Ball-Rokeach and colleagues wrote that health literacy and disaster preparedness benefits can be found by strengthening "neighborhood storytelling links," between residents, community organizations and local media. Efforts in this arena could include algorithmic prioritization of information, people, and stories that are physically close. It could also mean educating or coaching local activists or local media staff to improve their storytelling capacities. Social media

platforms could develop innovative new tools that allow users to tell stories that reach local communities, along with technical affordances that let users customize their local information intake and sharing. Other platform efforts could include interventions that explain to local communities the benefits of connecting with neighbors online and off.

Communicative infrastructures include institutionalized forms of information. Local news represents one such realm, and communication policy scholars such as Christopher Ali and Victor Pickard argued that there should be more mechanisms that subsidize local journalism. If social media users see more local news, they know more about local goings-on, and are better equipped to participate in civic life in their respective communities.

Although neighborhood forums and apps have merit, it is important that those aiming to build local connection acknowledge existing local news consumption patterns. Legacy organizations such as television outlets still play an important role in delivering local news. If social media platforms seek to foreground and prioritize local news, this also means prioritizing local TV and radio outlets and their channels, and it may involve assisting local outlets in finding ways to transfer their content into social media online contexts and providing them with better means for monetization of content.

One interesting policy solution to overcome some of the problems faced by local news is mentioned in a report by communication researcher Jessica Mahone and colleagues. The "Journalism Competition and Preservation Act" proposes safe harbor from antitrust laws if local news outlets across the country were to band together to increase their nego-

tiating power with big technology companies by allowing the outlets to discuss the advertising shares that they get from technology platforms. Leveraging power against tech companies may be one way forward. Another would be for technology companies – of their own accord -- to create public interest provisions for local news providers, operating outside the scope of what markets can compensate voluntarily. This could mean subsidizing local news by pushing it in news feeds, something that some platforms already do. Increasing access to reader data could also help local news organizations, as would systems that allow local newsrooms to perform A/B testing and experimentation collaboratively at scale, as Hindman suggests. Another interesting suggestion by Pickard involves directing a share of technology companies' advertising revenue to subsidize local public interest journalism.

Separate from communicative and news infrastructures, scholars also suggest repurposing and strengthening other forms of public infrastructure. Klinenberg, for instance, argued for investing in more social infrastructure, by which he refers to "the physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact." Such social infrastructures are the prerequisite for social capital to develop, argued Klinenberg. In his book, libraries serve as a particularly vivid example. Libraries can be envisaged as "palaces for the people," after Andrew Carnegie's famous quote. Moving the needle on infrastructure could mean drastically expanding library services and conceptualizing them as a social infrastructure grid for the nation, with the potential for building out community hubs. Platforms could be a larger part of this movement.

How to Measure

Measuring local connection can be executed on a variety of levels, from individual psychometric measures to ecological approaches that factor in various systemic components, or even assessments of the health of local news ecosystems.

On an individual level, place attachment is an environmental psychology measure that seeks to capture the emotional connection people have with places. As such, it can be measured with a variety of scales, as well as qualitative methods; environmental psychology professor Bernardo Hernandez and colleagues have provided a good overview of measurement techniques. Importantly, measurements stemming from environmental psychology are for the most part less focused on bonding and human connections than on place itself.

Scannell and Gifford's parsing of the concept of place attachment into different dimensions is helpful, as it differentiates between (1) perceptions – how individuals and groups perceive attachment to a place, (2) psychological – affective, cognitive and behavioral notions connected to place attachment, and (3) place-related features, such as the specificity of the place (e.g., a concrete place vs. an umbrella category of places). This last dimension can also be classified in two levels: physical and social place attachment.

Kim and Ball-Rokeach subsumed neighborhood belonging as one of three dimensions of civic engagement (the other two being collective efficacy and civic participation). To measure neighborhood belonging, Ball-Rokeach and colleagues proposed the so-called belonging index, an "8-item measure of subjective and objective belonging," asking questions about neighbors, the neighborhood, interactions, and helping.

Wellman and colleagues suggested measuring network capital through media use and interpersonal network contact, participatory capital through organizational and political participation, and finally, community commitment through whether "people have a strong attitude toward community – have a motivated, responsible sense of belonging."

Another method of measurement was proposed by McLeod and colleagues, who presented a set of items to measure community integration, including psychological attachment (attachment to a place), interpersonal networks (interactions and discussions with people in the neighborhood), city vs. group identification (the types of organizations and communities with which people identify), local vs. cosmopolitan attitudes, and city vs. neighborhood attitudes.

Social network research has a long and rich history of devising ways to measure strong and weak ties and their nodes – sociology professors Peter Marsden and Karen Campbell provide a good starting point.

Finally, when assessing the health of local news ecosystems, Philip Napoli and colleagues provided a model of measurement that aims to quantify and document three dimensions: journalistic infrastructure, output, and performance.

Equipped with new ideas surrounding interventions and these measurement techniques to evaluate their effectiveness, platforms can devise ways of strengthening local connection.
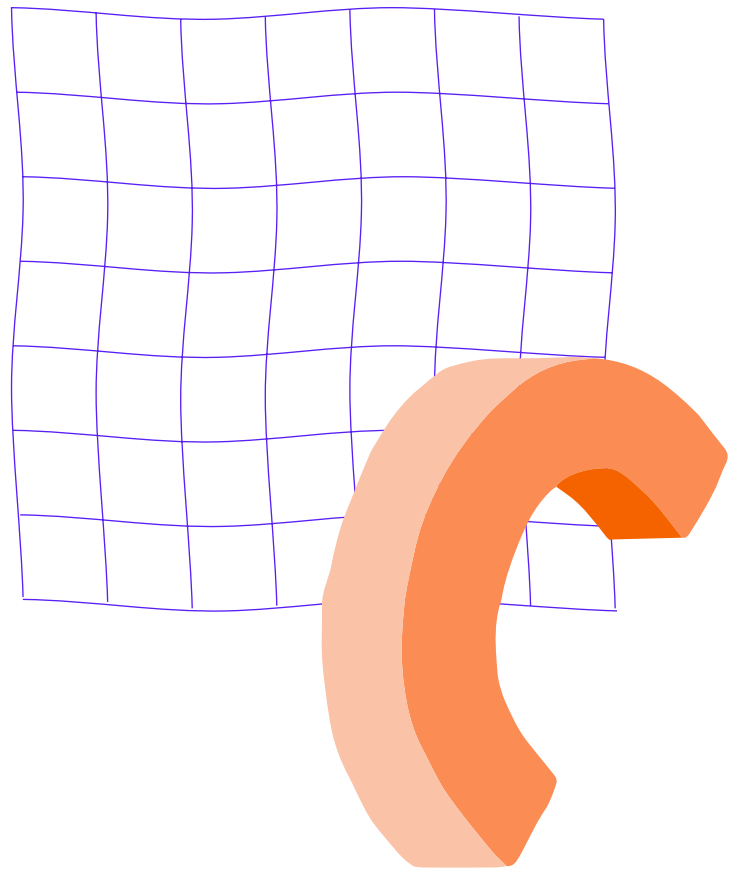
Foundational Works

- Ali, C. (2017). **Media localism: The policies of place**. University of Illinois Press.

- Granovetter, M. (1973). **The strength of weak ties**. American Journal of Sociology, 78(6), 1360–1380.

- Kim, Y.-C., & Ball-Rokeach, S. J. (2006). **Civic engagement from a communication infrastructure perspective**. Communication Theory, 16(2), 173–197.

- Kim, Y.-C., & Ball-Rokeach, S. J. (2006). **Community storytelling network, neighborhood context, and civic engagement: A multilevel approach**. Human Communication Research, 32(4), 411–439.

- Klinenberg, E. (2018). **Palaces for the people: How social infrastructure can help fight inequality, polarization, and the decline of civic life**. Broadway Books.

Further Reading

- Abernathy, P. M. (2020) **News deserts and ghost newspapers: Will local news survive?** The Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media. University of North Carolina Press. https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2020_News_Deserts_and_Ghost_Newspapers.pdf

- Afzalan, N., & Muller, B. (2014). **The role of social media in green infrastructure planning: A case study of neighborhood participation in park siting**. Journal of Urban Technology, 21(3), 67–83.

- Ali, C. (2016). **Critical regionalism and the policies of place: Revisiting localism for the digital age**. Communication Theory, 26(2), 106–127.

- Altman, I., & Low, S. (Eds.). (2012). **Place attachment** (12th ed.). Springer Science & Business Media.

- Anguelovski, I. (2013). **From environmental trauma to safe haven: Place attachment and place remaking in three marginalized neighborhoods of Barcelona, Boston, and Havana**. City and Community, 12(3), 211–237.

- Ball-Rokeach, S. J., Kim, Y.-C., & Matei, S. (2001). **Storytelling neighborhood: Paths to belonging in diverse urban environments**. Communication Research, 28(4), 392–428.

- Burgess, E. R., Walter, N., Ball-Rokeach, S. J., & Murphy, S. T.

- (2019). **Communication hotspots: How infrastructure shapes people's health**. Health Communication.

- Downie, Jr., L. & Schudson M. (2009). **The reconstruction of American journalism**. Columbia Journalism Review. https://archives.cjr.org/reconstruction/the_reconstruction_of_american.php

- Friedland, L. A. (2001). **Communication, community, and democracy: Toward a theory of the communicatively integrated community**. Communication Research 28(4), 358–391.

- Friedland, L. A., Napoli, P. M., Ognyanova, K., Weil, C., & Wilson III, E. J. (2012). **Review of the literature regarding critical information needs of the American public**. Washington, D.C.: Federal Communications Commission.

- Greenbaum, S. D. (1982). **Bridging ties at the neighborhood level**. Social Networks, 4, 367–384.

- Hampton, K., & Wellman, B. (2003). **Neighboring in Netville: How the internet supports community and social capital in a wired suburb**. City and Community, 2(4), 277–311.

- Hernandez, B., Hidalgo, M. C., & Ruiz, C. (2014). **Theoretical and methodological aspects of research on place attachment**. In Place attachment: Advances in theory, methods and applications (pp. 125–137). Routledge.

- Hess, K., & Waller, L. (2017). **Defining the local in a 'geo-social' context**. In Local journalism in a digital world (pp. 36–58). Palgrave.

- Hindman, M. (2018) **The internet trap: How the digital economy builds monopolies and undermines democracy**. Princeton University Press.

- Kim, Y.-C., & Kang, J. (2010). **Communication, neighbourhood belonging and household hurricane preparedness**. Disasters, 34(2), 470–488.

- Kim, Y.-C., Lim, J. Y., & Park, K. (2015). **Effects of health literacy and social capital on health information behavior**. Journal of Health Communication, 20(9), 1084–1094.

- Klinenberg, E. (2015). **Heat wave: A social autopsy of disaster in Chicago**. University of Chicago Press.

- Lambright, K. (2019). **Digital redlining: The Nextdoor app and the neighborhood of make-believe**. Cultural Critique, 103, 84–90.

- Mahone, J., Wang, Q., Napoli, P., Weber, M., & McCollough, K. (2019). **Who's producing local journalism? Assessing journalistic output across different outlet types**. DeWitt Wallace Center for Media & Democracy at Duke University.

- Marsden, P. V, & Campbell, K. E. (2012). **Reflections on conceptualizing and measuring tie strength**. Social Forces, 91(1), 17–23.

- Marsden, P. V, & Campbell, K. E. (1984). **Measuring tie strength**. Social Forces, 63(2), 482–501.

- Massey, D. B. (2005). **For space**. SAGE.

- McCormick, A. (2019, June 13). **Two new bills in Congress propose a helping hand for a hurting industry**. Columbia Journalism Review. https://www.cjr.org/politics/congress-bills-support-local-news.php

- McLeod, J. M., Daily, K., Guo, Z., Eveland Jr., W. P., Bayer, J., Yang, S., & Wang, H. (1996). **Community integration, local media use, and democratic processes**. Communication Research, 23(2), 179–209.

- McLuhan, M. (1962). **The Gutenberg galaxy: The making of typographic man**. University of Toronto Press.

- Mitchell, A., Matsa, K.E., Weisel, R., et al. (2019). **For local news, Americans embrace digital but still want strong community connection**. Pew Research Center. https://www.journalism.org/2019/03/26/for-local-news-americans-embrace-digital-but-still-want-strong-community-connection/

- Napoli, P.M., Stonbely, S., McCollough, K., et al. (2017). **Local journalism and the information needs of local communities: Toward a scalable assessment approach**. Journalism Practice 11(4), 373–395.

- Pickard, V. (2013). **Social democracy or corporate libertarianism? Conflicting media policy narratives in the wake of market failure**. Communication Theory, 23(4), 336–355.

- Pickard, V. (2017, November 28). **The big picture: Misinformation society**. Public Books. http://www.publicbooks.org/the-big-picture-misinformation-society/

- Riger, S., & Lavrakas, P. J. (1981). **Community ties: Patterns of attachment and social interaction in urban neighborhoods**. American Journal of Community Psychology, 9(1), 55–66.

- Scannell, L., & Gifford, R. (2010). **Defining place attachment: A tripartite organizing framework**. Journal of Environmental Psychology, 30(1), 1–10.

- Scannell, L., & Gifford, R. (2010). **The relations between natural and civic place attachment and pro-environmental behavior**. Journal of Environmental Psychology, 30(3), 289–297.

- Scannell, L., & Gifford, R. (2017). **The experienced psychological benefits of place attachment**. Journal of Environmental Psychology, 51, 256–269.

- Selasi, T. (2014). **Don't ask where I'm from, ask where I'm a local**. TEDGlobal 2014. https://www.ted.com/talks/taiye_selasi_don_t_ask_where_i_m_from_ask_where_i_m_a_local

- Stefaniak, A., Bilewicz, M., & Lewicka, M. (2017). **The merits of teaching local history: Increased place attachment enhances civic engagement and social trust**. Journal of Environmental Psychology, 51, 217–225.

- Wakefield, S. E. L., Elliott, S. J., Cole, D. C., & Eyles, J. D. (2001). **Environmental risk and (re)action: Air quality, health, and civic involvement in an urban industrial neighbourhood**. Health and Place, 7(3), 163–177.

- Waldman, S., & Working Group on Information Needs of Communities. (2011). **The information needs of communities: The changing media landscape in a broadband age**. Federal Communications Commission.

- Wellman, B., Quan Haase, A., Witte, J., & Hampton, K. (2001). **Does the Internet increase, decrease, or supplement social capital? Social networks, participation, and community commitment**. American Behavioral Scientist, 45(3), 436–455.

- Wilkin, H. A., Moran, M. B., Ball-Rokeach, S. J., Gonzalez, C., & Kim, Y.-C. (2010). **Applications of communication infrastructure theory.** Health Communication, 25(6–7), 611–612.

Expert Q&A
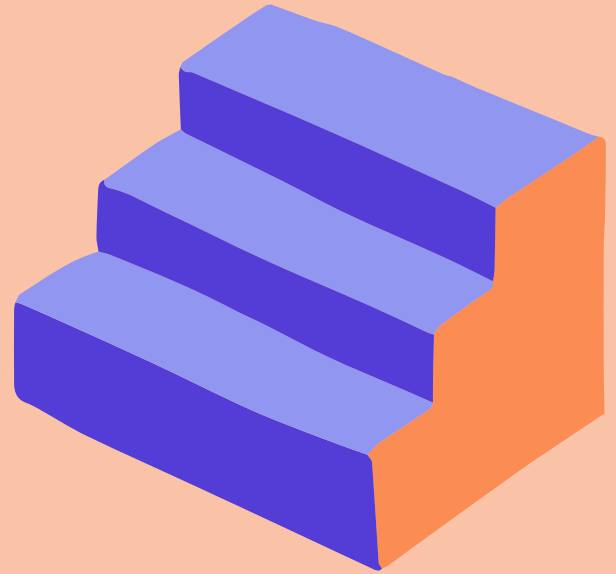
Three key questions with
Christopher Ali, University of Virginia

How does this principle help create a world we'd all want to live in?

All communication, whether digital or face-to-face, is a fundamentally local phenomenon and social practice. Keeping this concept of local in mind reminds us that our lives are fundamentally place-based (not place-bound) and that they are fundamentally communicative. If we are re-imagining a globally-connected world, starting from the local connects us back to tenets of governance, responsibility and community. It does not negate the global, but it also does not subsume the local into a "global village." It is also deeply subjective – one person's local is not another person's local. Acknowledging

this agency is empowering. All too often, we think of the local as a static, reductive, regressive, and conservative environment, while the global encompasses all of our hopes and dreams of travel, knowledge, information, and media. What we need to realize is that the two are neither binaries, nor dichotomies, but one and the same. The local can be as progressive and empowering, as the global is restrictive and destructive (certainly neoliberal capitalism has taught us that much). Starting the conversation from the local, from a sense of being local and of asking participants "where are you a local?" as Taiye Selasi does, reinforces the belief that any substantive and meaningful change in the world needs to be about people, and

not about technologies and certainly not about the economy.

If you were to envisage the perfect social media, messaging or web search platform in terms of maximizing this principle, what would it look like?

Many have tried to instill a local component on social media, most have failed. Others have tried to create local-only apps, platforms, and messengers (i.e. Bridgefy, Firechat, Foursquare, YikYak) and many of these have failed (YikYak) or have limited use (Bridgefy, Firechat). What is key is that any new social media venture that seeks to accentuate the local must not come from capital or the market, nor intended to stimulate capital or the market. The local does not make money, and as a result, once a local initiative is subsumed into digital capitalism, it quickly becomes erased. Think about what

happened when Facebook bought Foursquare – this local check in feature quickly became lost in a series of adjustments at the larger company. As such, we need a stronger effort to stimulate a public social media platform that would begin with the local element and move from there.

How would you measure a messaging, social media, or web search platform's progress against this principle?

Assessment could be done by monitoring engagement, both in terms of the number of participants and in terms of messages sent, pictures uploaded, maps tagged, etc… To limit it to local engagement, you could design a social media platform with limited reach, such as was done with Yik Yak. The key elements are to keep it local and to keep it public (i.e. non-commercial).

Survey results
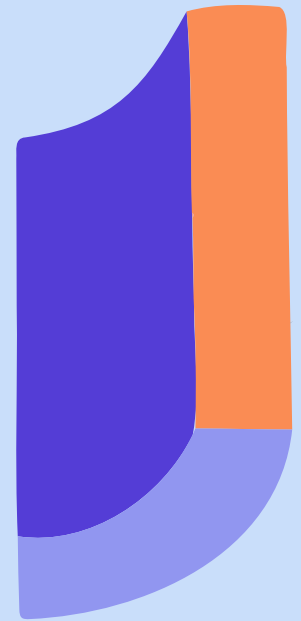
By Jay Jennings, Taeyoung Lee, Tamar Wilner, and Talia Stroud, Center for Media Engagement

We conducted a survey with participants in 20 countries to understand more deeply how the signals resonated with people globally. Please find more about the methodology here.

The survey asked people to evaluate whether it was important for platforms to "strengthen people's connections to their local area," and asked people to assess how well the platforms perform with respect to this signal. People were only asked about the platforms for which they are "superusers," by which we mean people who identify the platform as their most used social media, messaging, or search platform.

We analyzed how different demographic and political groups rate the importance of this signal, as well as the platforms' performance. In particular, we looked at age, gender, education, ideology, and country.

We did this analysis for five platforms: Google, Facebook, YouTube, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp.[1] Only statistically significant results are shown and discussed.

_____

1 The analyses include only countries where at least 200 people responded that the social/ message/ search platform was the one that they use most frequently, and then only those platforms where we had data for at least 1,000 people. For Google, this includes all 20 countries. For Facebook, this includes 18 countries and excludes Japan and South Korea. For YouTube, this includes Brazil, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, and the United States. For Facebook Messenger, this includes Australia, Canada, France, Ireland, Norway, Poland, Romania, Sweden, the U.K., and the United States. For WhatsApp, this includes all countries except Canada, Japan, Norway, Poland, South Korea, Sweden, and the United States. Note that the total number of respondents varies by platform: Google = 19,554; Facebook = 10,268; YouTube = 2,937; Facebook Messenger = 4,729; and WhatsApp = 10,181. The larger the sample size, the smaller the effect that we are able to detect.

Importance of the Signal

We first examined whether platform superusers thought that the signal was important. This signal was ranked more highly by WhatsApp superusers than it was by superusers of other platforms.

Importance ranking: Strengthen local ties

A ranking of "1" means that the signal was seen as the most important of the 14 signals for superusers of a given platform in a given country based on a survey of over 20,000 people across 20 countries.
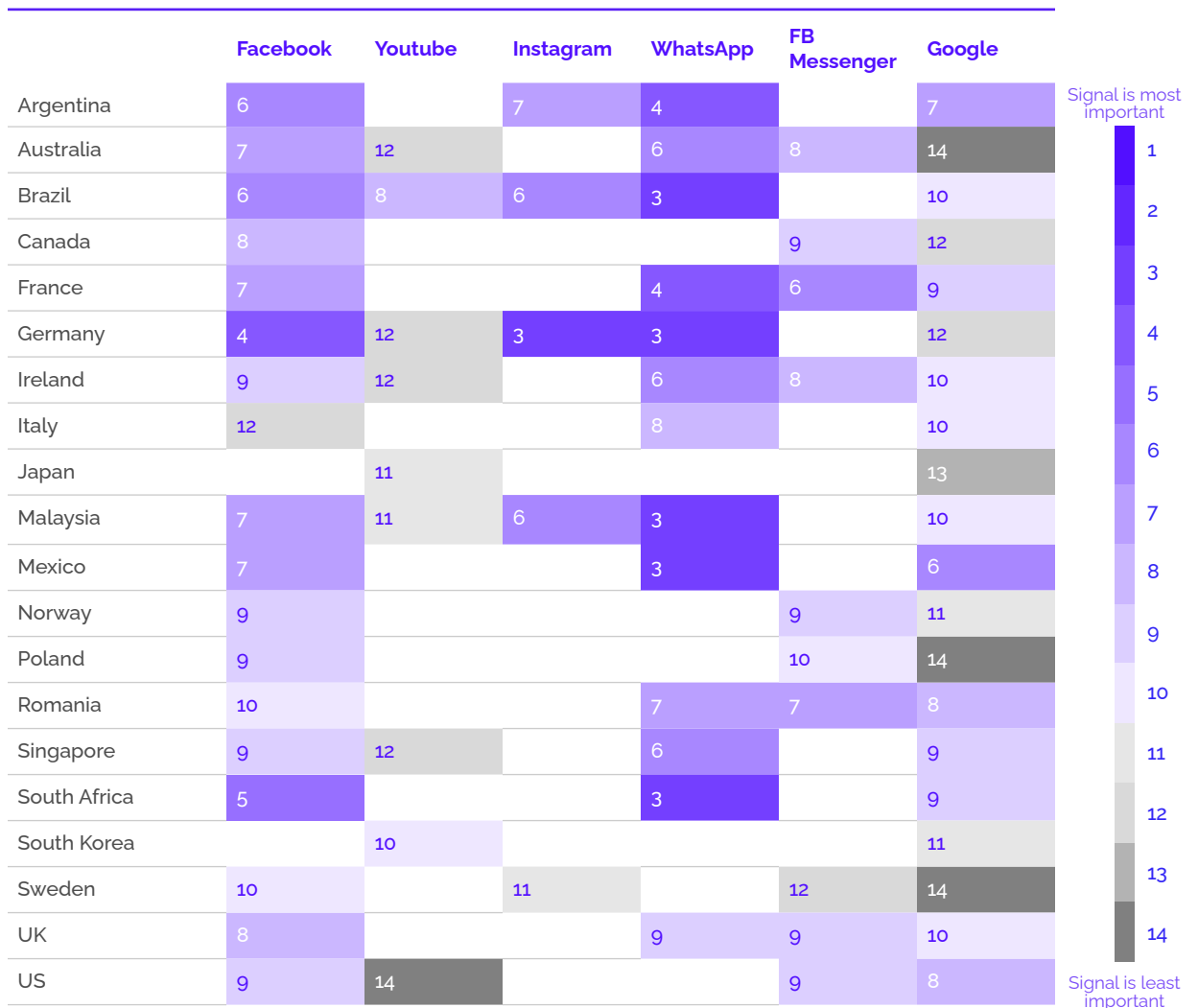
	Facebook	Youtube	Instagram	WhatsApp	FB Messenger	Google
Argentina	6		7	4		7
Australia	7	12		6	8	14
Brazil	6	8	6	3		10
Canada	8				9	12
France	7			4	6	9
Germany	4	12	3	3		12
Ireland	9	12		6	8	10
Italy	12			8		10
Japan		11				13
Malaysia	7	11	6	3		10
Mexico	7			3		6
Norway	9				9	11
Poland	9				10	14
Romania	10			7	7	8
Singapore	9	12		6		9
South Africa	5			3		9
South Korea		10				11
Sweden	10		11		12	14
UK	8			9	9	10
US	9	14			9	8

Signal is most important
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
Signal is least important

Data from the Center for Media Engagement. Weighted data. Asked of those who indicated that a given social media, messaging or search platform was their most used. Question wording: Which of the following do you think it is important for [INSERT SOCIAL, MESSAGING OR SEARCH PLATFORM] to do? Please select all that apply. Data only shown for those countries where at least 200 survey respondents said that the platform was their most used social media, messaging, or search platform.

Importance of the Signal by Age[2]

Age predicted whether superusers thought it was important to "strengthen people's connections to their local area" for three platforms: Facebook, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp. For Facebook, the younger age groups (18-44) were less likely to say this signal was important compared to the oldest age group (55+). For Facebook Messenger, those in the 55+ age group were more likely to say that the signal is important compared to those 25-54 years of age. For WhatsApp, the age group 55+ was more likely to say this signal was important compared to all other age groups.

2   Results shown are predicted probabilities, calculated from a logistic regression analysis predicting that the signal is important based on age, gender, education, ideology, and country, each treated as a categorical variable. The baseline (based on the excluded categories) is a 55+ year old male with high education and middle ideology from the United States (except for WhatsApp, where the baseline is South Africa).

Legend:
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55+

Y-axis: Probability of saying signal is important
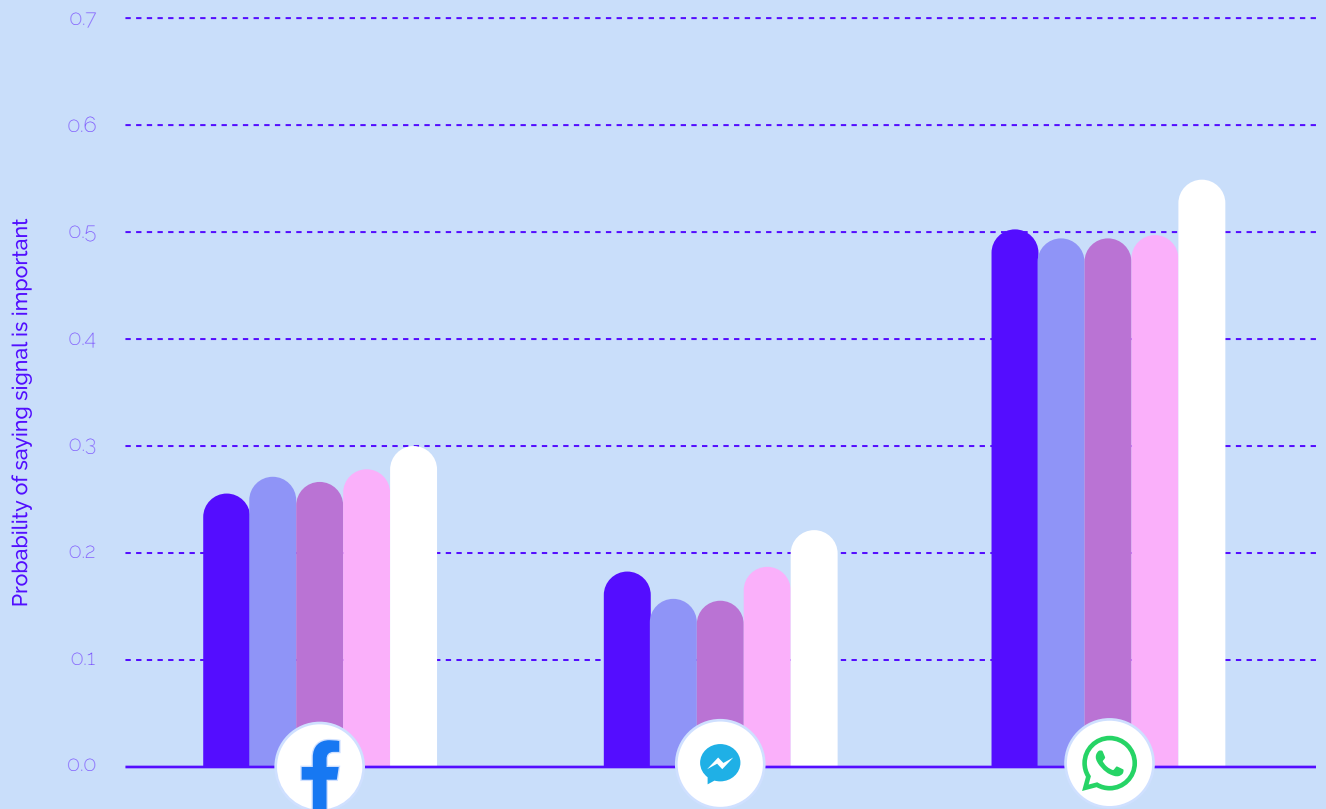
Importance of the Signal by Gender

Only for Facebook did men and women differ in the importance they ascribed to strengthening local ties. For this platform, women were more likely than men to say this signal was important.

Probability of saying signal is important

0.6

0.5

0.4

0.3

0.2

0.1

0.0

● Female

○ Male
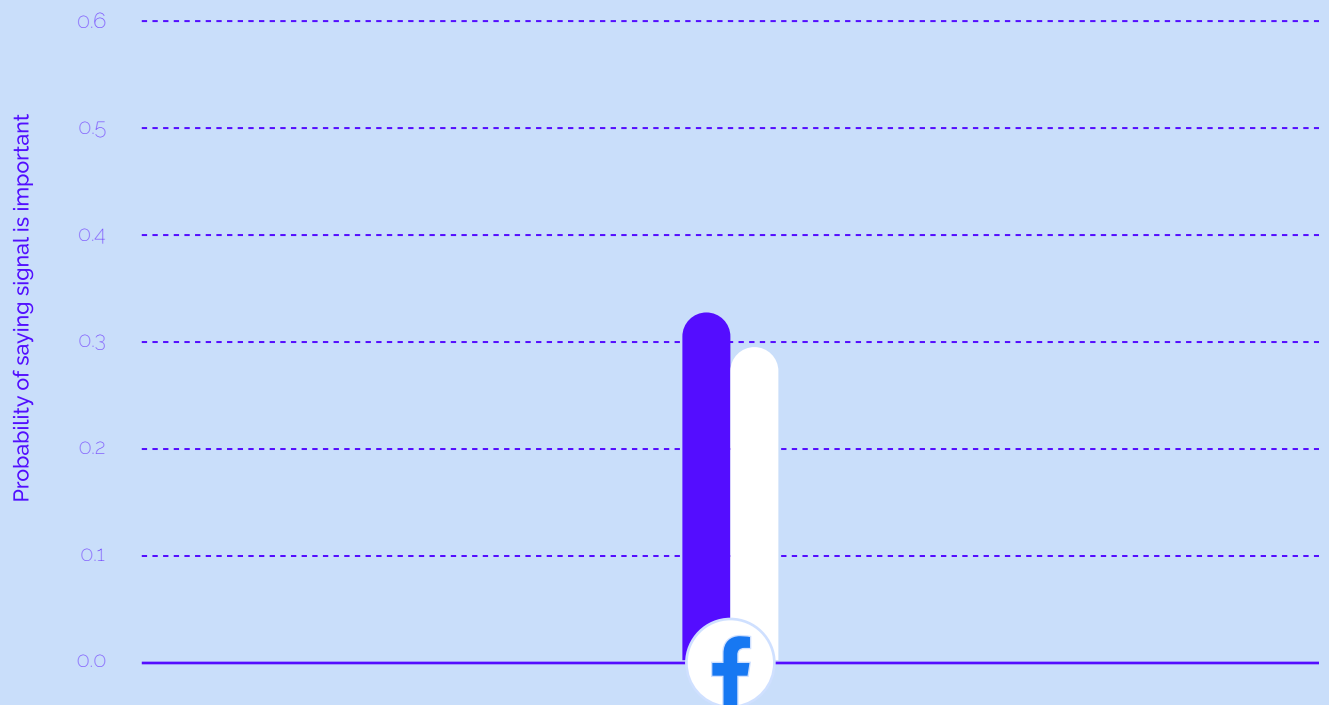
Importance of the Signal by Education

Again, only for Facebook were there differences across education levels in how respondents viewed the importance of strengthening local ties. Superusers with lower levels of education correspond with lower likelihood of saying this signal was important and those with higher education levels were more likely to think the signal was important for Facebook.
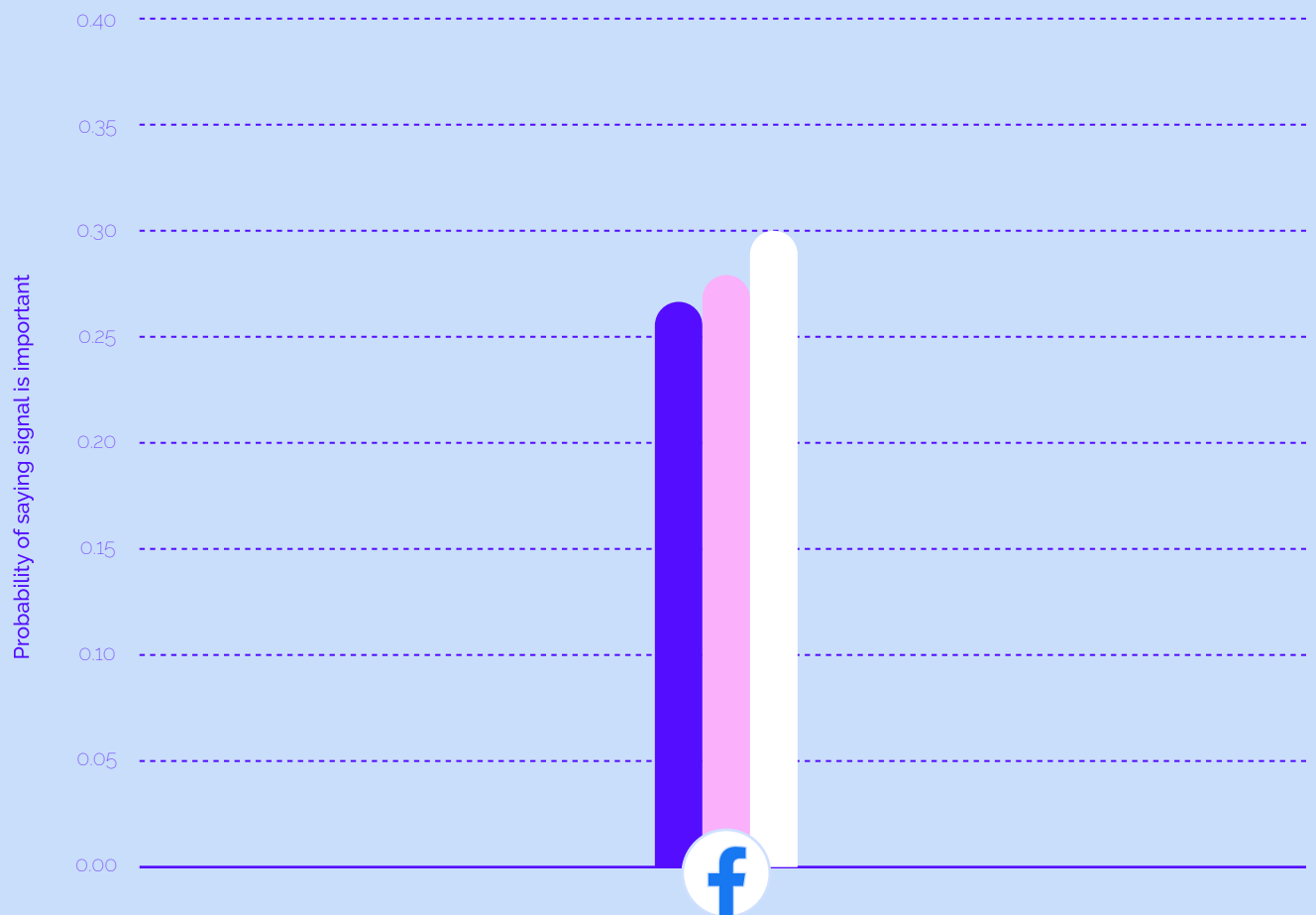
Importance of the Signal by Ideology[3]

There were differences across political ideology in those who say it is important to "strengthen people's connections to their local area" for all five platforms. For Google, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp, those who said they didn't know their ideology rated this signal as less important than those with defined ideologies. For Facebook Messenger, those on the left rated the signal as more important than those with other ideologies. For WhatsApp, those on the right rated the signal as more important than those on the left.

_____

3   Ideology was asked on a 10-point scale and people were given the option of saying "don't know." This was recoded into 4 categories (1 through 3, 4 through 7, 8 through 10, and "don't know").
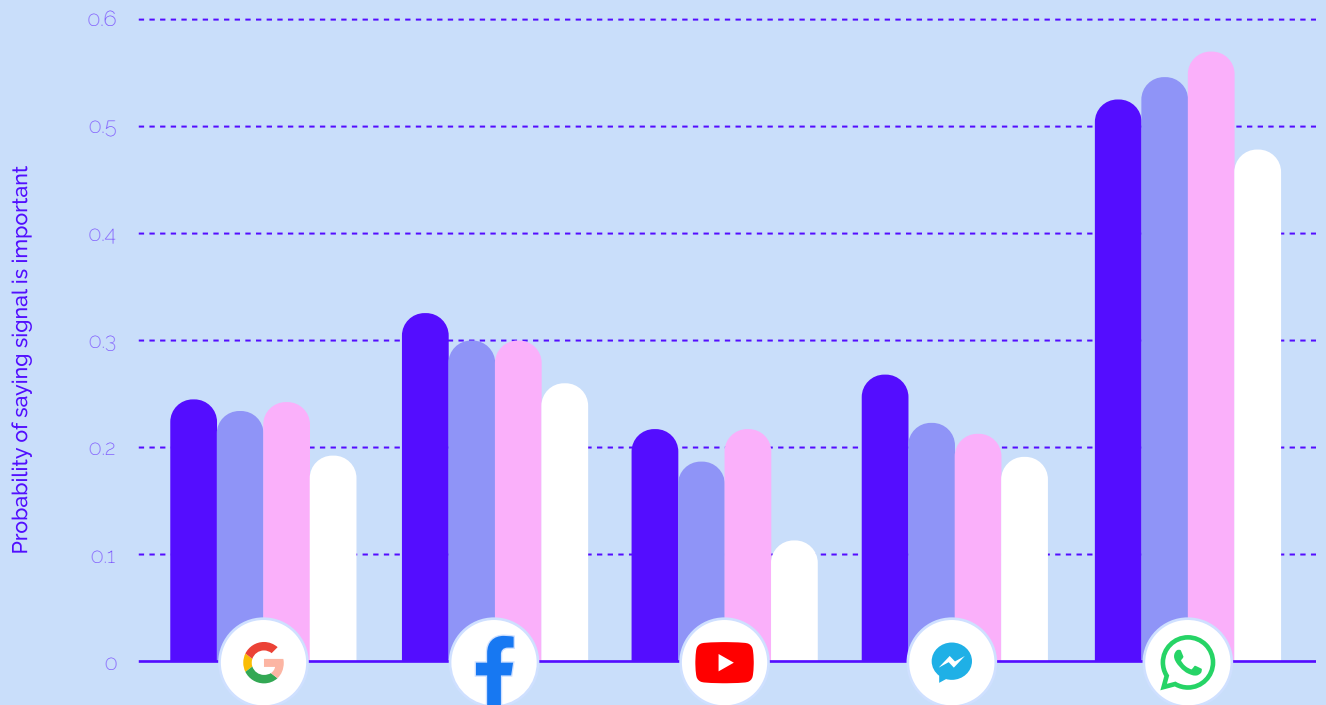
Importance of the Signal by Country

There was significant variation by country for all five of the platforms we examined based on how important people thought it was to "strengthen people's connections to their local area." The chart below shows the probability of saying that the signal is important by platform and by country. Overall, survey respondents in South Africa, Brazil, and Malaysia were the most likely to say this signal was important. Sweden and Japan were the least likely to say this was important.
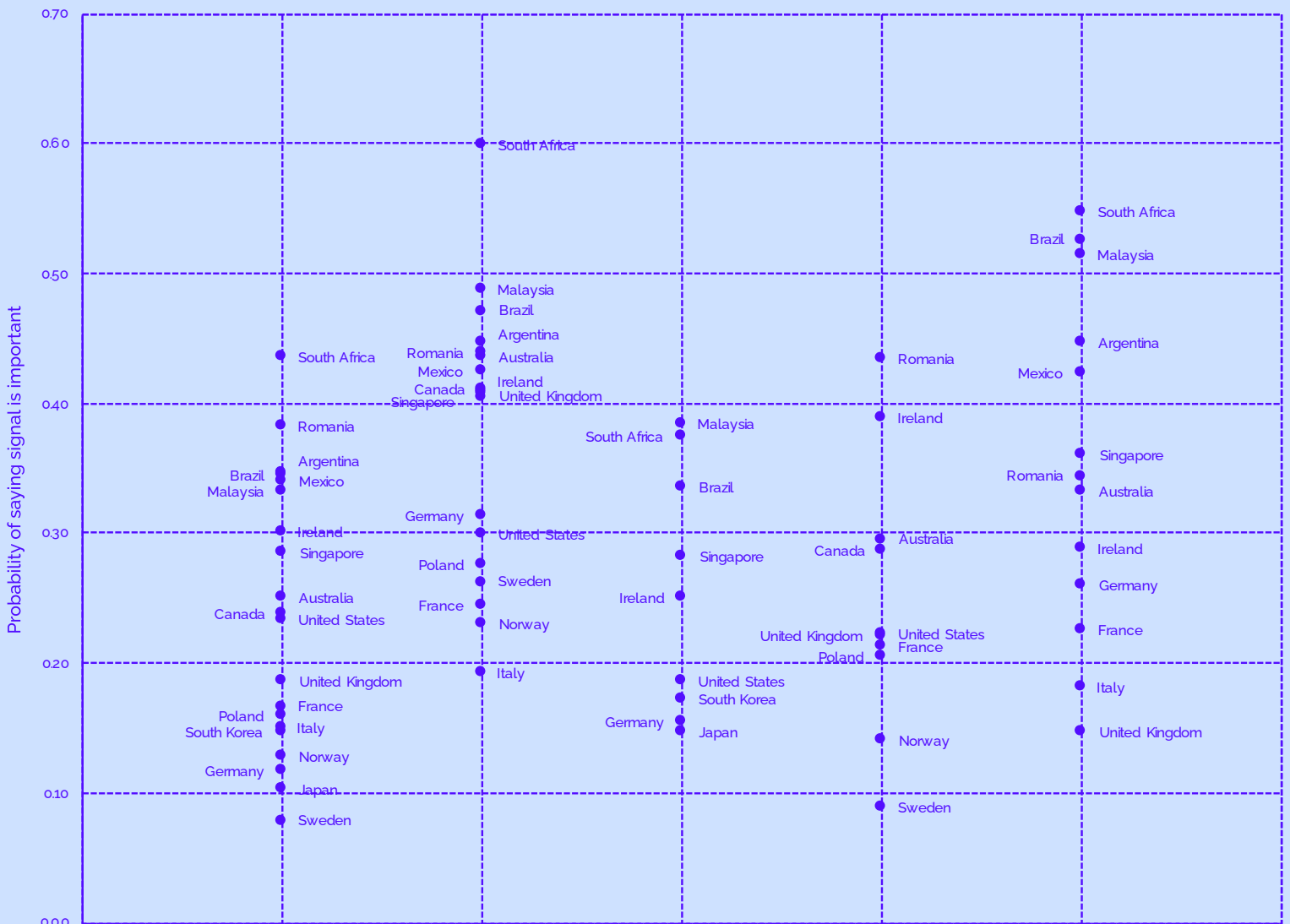
Platform Performance on the Signal

For specific platforms, superusers were first asked to say on which of the signals they thought that the platform was doing well, and then on which of the signals they thought that the platform was doing poorly. We then categorized people's responses as (0) believe that the platform is doing poorly, (1) believe that the platform is doing neither well nor poorly, or (2) believe that the platform is doing well. In most cases, platforms were rated as doing better than neutral (1.0) with respect to this signal. WhatsApp earned the highest marks from superusers in Argentina, Brazil, and South Africa.

Performance index: Strengthen local ties

Responses of "2" indicate that everyone in a particular country thought that the platform was performing well on a signal; responses of "0" indicate that no one in a particular country thought that the platform was performing well on a signal based on a survey of over 20,000 people across 20 countries.

	Facebook	Youtube	Instagram	WhatsApp	FB Messenger	Google
Argentina	1.2		1.2	1.4		1.2
Australia	1.3	1.0		1.2	1.1	1.1
Brazil	1.2	1.2	1.4	1.4		1.2
Canada	1.1				1.1	1.1
France	1.2			1.1	1.1	1.0
Germany	1.3	1.0	1.1	1.2		1.0
Ireland	1.1	1.1		1.2	1.2	1.2
Italy				1.1		1.0
Japan	1.3	1.0				1.0
Malaysia	1.3	1.2	1.3	1.3		1.2
Mexico	1.1			1.3		1.2
Norway	1.2				1.0	1.0
Poland	1.3				1.1	1.1
Romania	1.3			1.2	1.3	1.2
Singapore	1.4	1.1		1.2		1.2
South Africa				1.4		1.2
South Korea	1.1	1.1				1.0
Sweden	1.3		1.0		1.0	1.0
UK	1.2			1.0	1.1	1.0
US		0.9			1.1	1.1

Well
2.0
1.8
1.6
1.4
1.2
1.0
0.8
0.6
0.4
0.2
0
Poor

Data from the Center for Media Engagement. Weighted data. Asked of those who indicated that a given social media, messaging or search platform was their most used. Question wording - Which of the following do you think [INSERT SOCIAL, MESSAGING OR SEARCH PLATFORM] does well at? Please select all that apply. And which of the following do you think [INSERT SOCIAL, MESSAGING OR SEARCH PLATFORM] does poorly at? Please select all that apply. Data only shown for those countries where at least 200 survey respondents said that the platform was their most used social media, messaging, or search platform.

Platform Performance on the Signal by Age[4]

For Facebook, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp the responses about signal perfor-mance differ by age. For Facebook and WhatsApp, the younger age groups rated the platform's performance more poorly and the older age groups rated its performance at strengthening local ties more positively. For Facebook Messenger, those in the 55+ age group gave Facebook Messenger a higher rating than younger age groups.

_____

4　　Results shown are predicted responses, calculated from a regression analysis predicting that the signal is important based on age, gender, education, ideology, and country, each treated as a categorical variable. The baseline (based on the excluded categories) is a 55+ year old male with high education and middle ideology from the United States (except for WhatsApp, where the baseline is Germany).

Evaluation of platform on signal (from doing poorly=0, to doing well=2)

Legend:
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55+
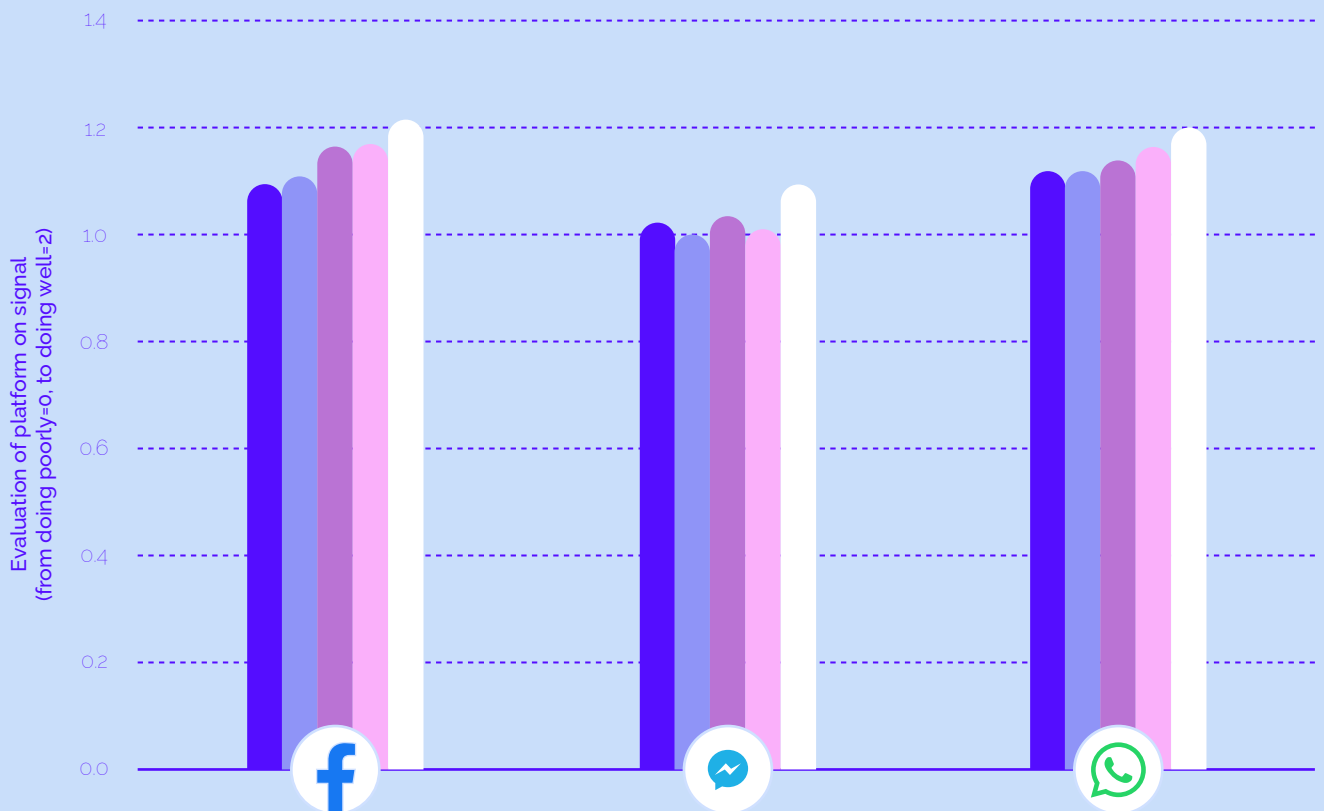
Platform Performance on the Signal by Gender

For Google, Facebook, YouTube, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp, women rated the platforms' performance on "strengthen people's connections to their local area" better than did men.

Evaluation of platform on signal
(from doing poorly=0, to doing well=2)

- ● Female
- ○ Male
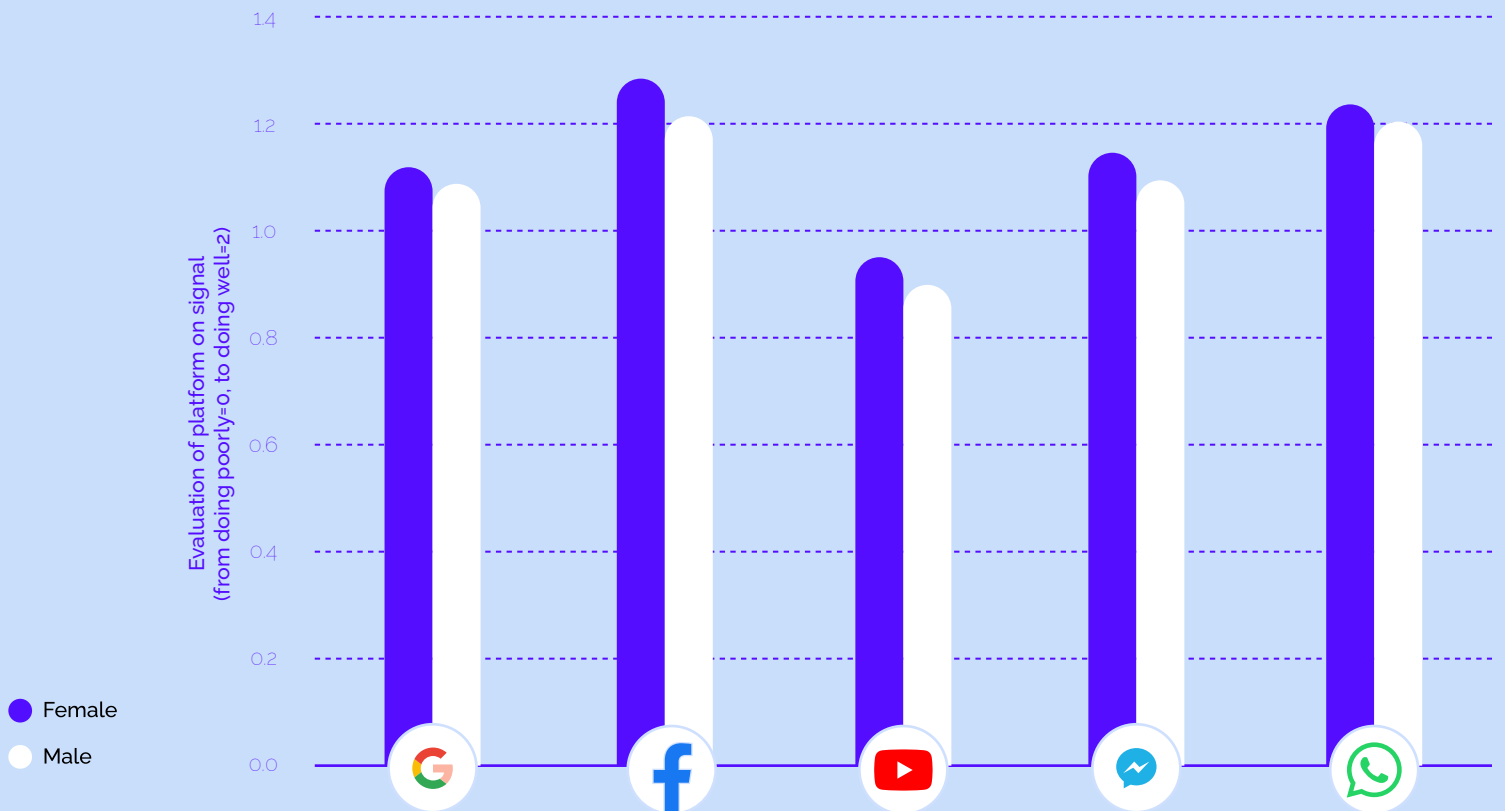
Platform Performance on the Signal by Education

For Google and WhatsApp, responses rating the platforms' performance on "strengthen people's connections to their local area" differed by education levels. For both, superusers with middle levels of education rated the platform's performance more positively than did those with high levels of education.
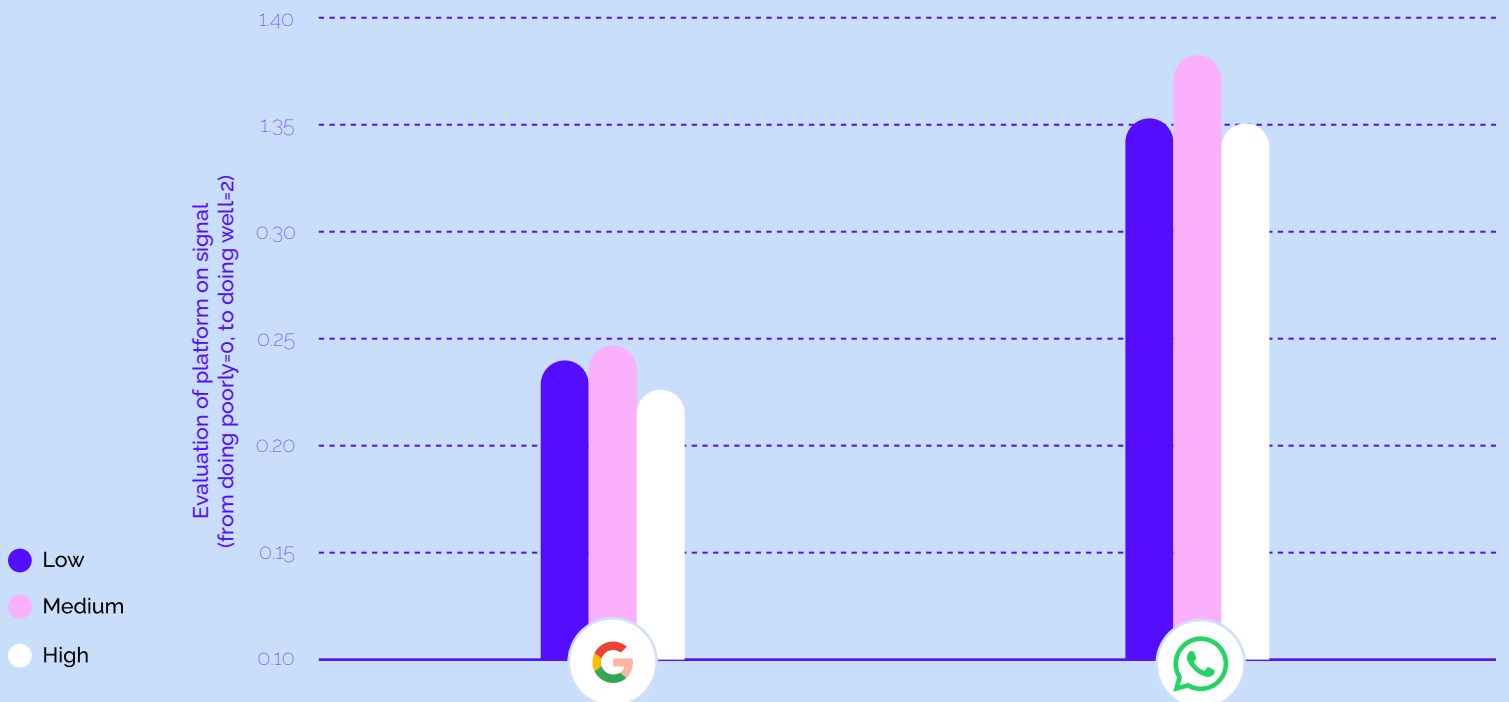
Platform Performance on the Signal by Ideology

For Google, Facebook, and YouTube, responses differed by political ideology for platform performance on the strengthening local ties signal. For Google, those on the right or in the middle rated the platform's performance as better than did those on the left or those who didn't know their ideology. For Facebook, those with ideologies in the middle rated the platform performance higher than did those on the left. For YouTube, those on the right rated the platform's performance as better than those with other ideologies.

- Left
- Middle
- Right
- Don't know

Evaluation of platform on signal (from doing poorly=0, to doing well=2)
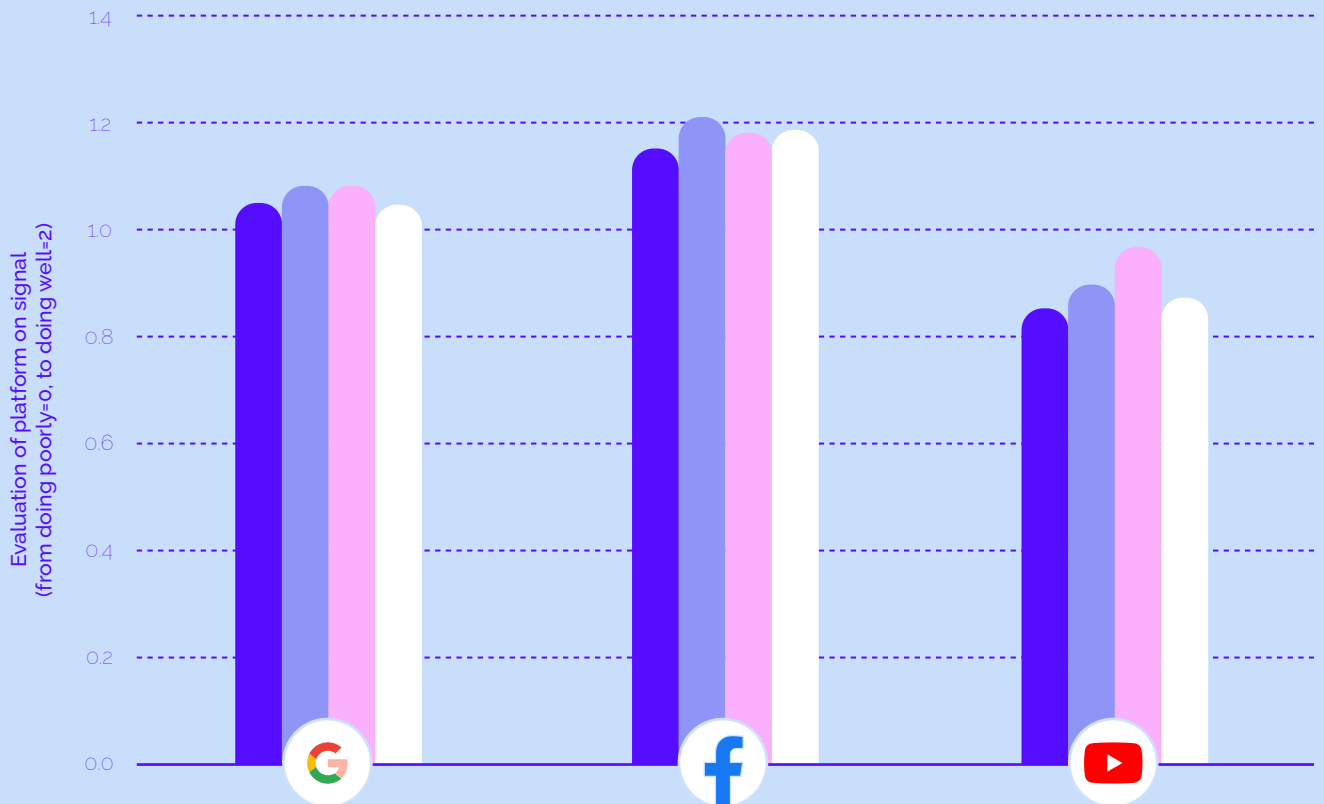
Platform Performance on the Signal by Country

There was variation by country in evaluations of platform performance. The chart below shows how superusers rated the platforms' performance in each country, controlling for age, gender, education, and ideology, from "doing poorly" (0) to "doing well" (2). In general, those in South Africa, Malaysia, Argentina, and Brazil tended to say that the platforms performed well compared to other countries. Sweden gave the lowest ratings for Google, Facebook, and Facebook Messenger while the United States gave the lowest rating for YouTube and the United Kingdom gave the lowest rating for WhatsApp.
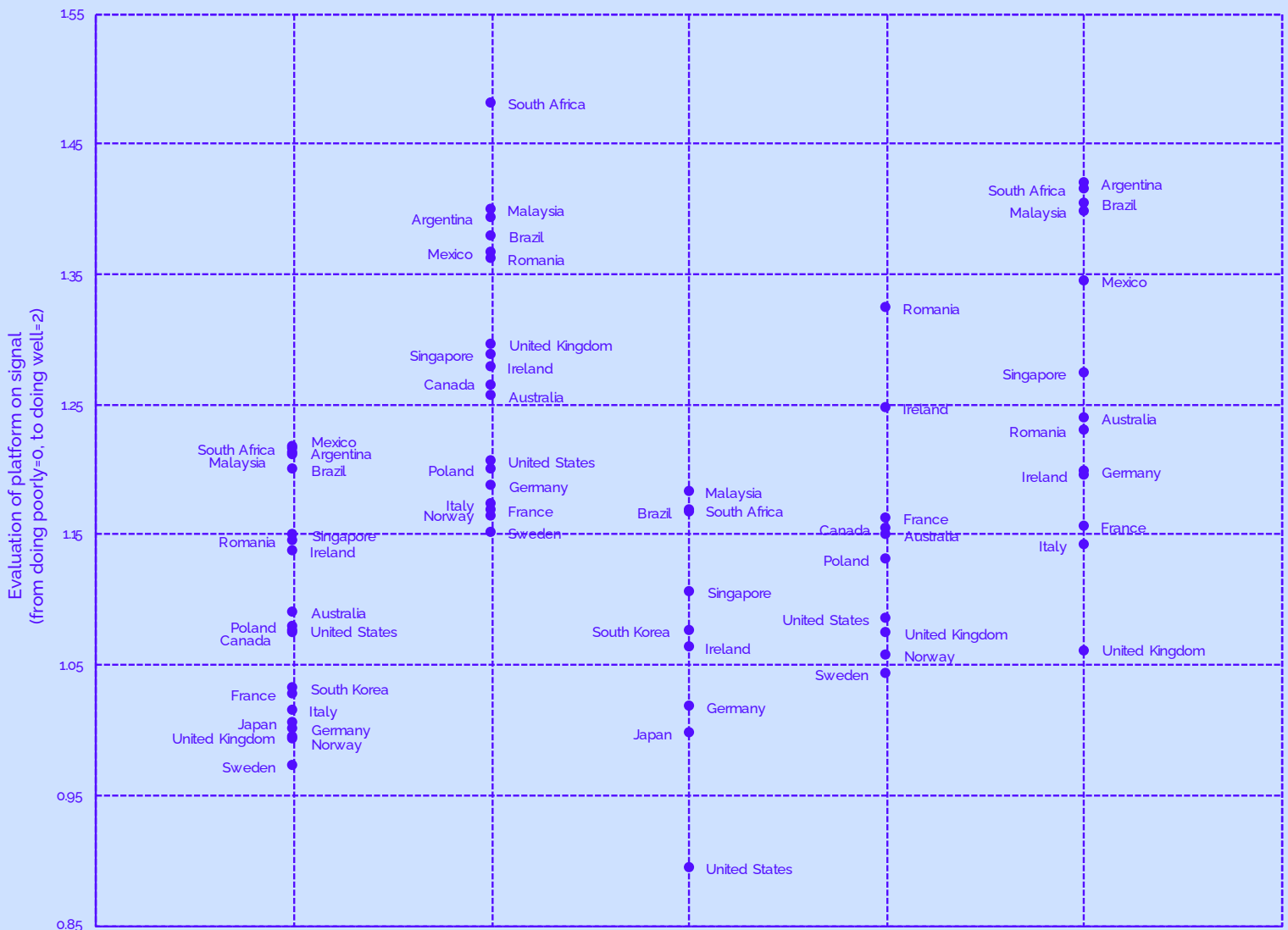
Focus group report
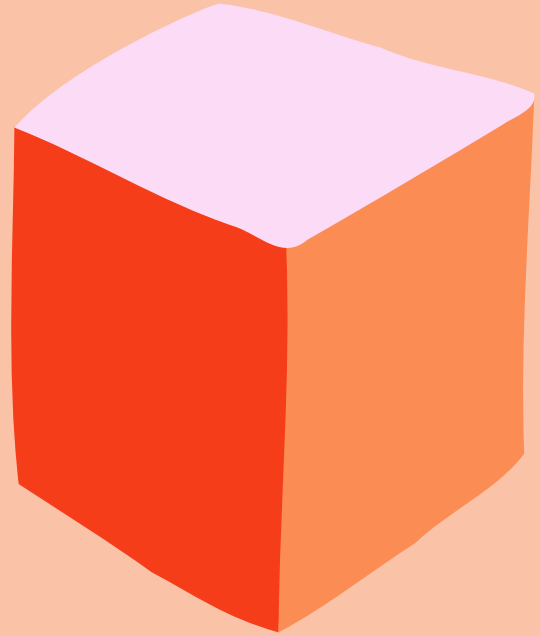
By Gina Masullo, Ori Tenenboim, and Martin Riedl,
Center for Media Engagement

We conducted two focus groups in each of five countries (Brazil, Germany, Malaysia, South Africa, and the United States). Please find more about the methodology here. Participants were asked to reflect on their social media experiences and the proposed signals. With respect to this signal, participants made several observations. Please note that all names included are pseudonyms.

Participants overall supported the idea that social media strengthen community connections, saying that social media allow them to get and share information about local issues and events, make requests from community members, and exchange ideas. They also felt social media helped them navigate their local communities better by giving them real-time news about what is going on.

> *There's a group in my region and people use it to help each other... I lost my ID card, and someone posted there, 'Your ID was found at this place.'"*
> *– Maria, Brazilian focus group participant*

Participants shared how through platforms, apps, or groups, they learned about what was happening around them. "I love

> **"** *I'm obsessed [with Citizen app]… It's basically people on the street reporting things they see – if someone is getting arrested, there's a fire, and they can live video. So everyone else who has Citizen can be like, if I'm uptown and someone is downtown and like watching the fire, I don't have to wait for Facebook to [see] the article." – Bonnie, United States focus group participant*

the events group just to see what's going on in the city," noted Mark, of the United States. "Sometimes they have free events you wouldn't even know about, so you just go on Facebook and you see it."

Isabelle, of Germany, said that she learned about demonstrations in her community because of Facebook invitations to these events. But, Bonnie, of the United States, prefers Citizen app, which sends location-based safety alerts, to find out what's going on locally. "I'm obsessed [with Citizen app]," she said. "… It's basically people on the street reporting things they see – if someone is getting arrested, there's a fire, and they can live video. So everyone else who has Citizen can be like, if I'm uptown and someone is downtown and like watching the fire, I don't have to wait for Facebook to [see] the article."

Other participants used a variety of social media to help navigate their communities and find out about problems as they happened. This is particularly helpful, Thabang, of South Africa, said because many people

live in a different place from where they work. "So you will know I can't use Main Reef Road going home because there is a service delivery happening," Thabang said. "…I will know from here which is a safe route to take." Similarly, Shahirah, of Malaysia, checks social media on the way home from work to see "Is there a jam? Is [a] certain road still closed?"

Participants also felt platforms helped them connect with their communities because they helped them help each other. "There's a group in my region and people use it to help each other," explained Maria, of Brazil. "… I lost my ID card, and someone posted there, 'Your ID was found at this place.'"

Walter, of Germany, said Facebook has neighborhood groups where people can find out how to get products, such as a CD drive, repaired nearby. "And this is how you get into contact with people. I can recommend that," he said.

User demographics from survey

Based on the survey respondents across all 20 countries, we looked at the demographics of superusers. For example, of those naming Facebook as their most used social media platform, 45% are male and 55% are female.

		f	**Instagram**	**in**	**Pinterest**	**reddit**
Gender	Male	45%	34%	76%	30%	74%
	Female	55%	66%	24%	70%	26%
Age	18 - 24	6%	31%	5%	6%	32%
	25 - 34	17%	32%	18%	16%	38%
	35 - 44	19%	17%	21%	20%	20%
	45 - 54	19%	9%	23%	19%	6%
	55+	39%	12%	33%	39%	3%
Education	Low	10%	7%	6%	13%	9%
	Medium	41%	38%	24%	45%	41%
	High	49%	55%	70%	42%	50%
Ideology	Left	15%	15%	11%	13%	38%
	Middle	45%	47%	60%	50%	49%
	Right	21%	16%	21%	19%	7%
	Don't know	18%	23%	9%	19%	6%

		Twitter	**YouTube**	**Messenger**	**KakaoTalk**	**Snapchat**
Gender	Male	59%	59%	45%	50%	44%
	Female	41%	41%	55%	50%	56%
Age	18 - 24	19%	15%	9%	12%	39%
	25 - 34	20%	19%	18%	17%	25%
	35 - 44	20%	20%	18%	18%	15%
	45 - 54	18%	17%	18%	17%	8%
	55+	24%	29%	37%	35%	13%
Education	Low	7%	9%	9%	2%	12%
	Medium	33%	38%	50%	34%	53%
	High	60%	53%	46%	64%	35%
Ideology	Left	20%	14%	19%	10%	18%
	Middle	49%	52%	42%	67%	46%
	Right	18%	17%	22%	13%	17%
	Don't know	14%	17%	17%	10%	19%

Connect: Strengthen local ties

		Telegram	WhatsApp	Bing	Google	Yahoo
Gender	Male	60%	47%	64%	48%	44%
	Female	40%	53%	36%	52%	58%
Age	18 - 24	21%	13%	10%	13%	5%
	25 - 34	33%	21%	19%	19%	11%
	35 - 44	18%	20%	14%	19%	15%
	45 - 54	15%	17%	16%	17%	17%
	55+	13%	29%	41%	32%	52%
Education	Low	11%	10%	12%	10%	8%
	Medium	31%	35%	38%	39%	36%
	High	58%	55%	39%	51%	56%
Ideology	Left	14%	14%	14%	16%	9%
	Middle	53%	49%	51%	48%	50%
	Right	18%	18%	38%	18%	19%
	Don't know	14%	19%	7%	18%	22%

Logo glossary

Social media

Facebook

Instagram

LinkedIn

Pinterest

Reddit

Twitter

YouTube

Messaging

Facebook Messenger

KakaoTalk

Snapchat

Telegram

WhatsApp

Search engines

Bing

Google

Yahoo

Civic Signals