Digital barriers and opportunities during reentry

Media Literacy in closed environments: prisons, detention, and restricted information spaces

Dr. Bibi C. Reisdorf
Department of Communication Studies
University of North Carolina Charlotte

21 October 2026



Overview

- The importance of digital literacy
- Digital Rehabilitation Model
- Research findings
  - Differences between digital literacy/technology experience by demographic (age, gender, sex, race)
  - The most pressing issues relating to digital literacy and access
- Trends
- Conclusion

The Importance of Digital Literacy

Universal Disadvantage

In technology-dependent societies, lack of access, skills, and usage opportunities is a disadvantage for anyone.

Essential Utility

Internet is considered a utility that is fundamental to full participation in society, rather than a luxury.

Unequal Distribution

Digital inequalities in levels of access, skills, usage, and outcomes are not equally distributed:

- Those who are better off already have more access, higher skills, broader/more usage, and benefit more from the internet
- Sequential and compound model of digital inequalities



The Importance of Digital Literacy cont.

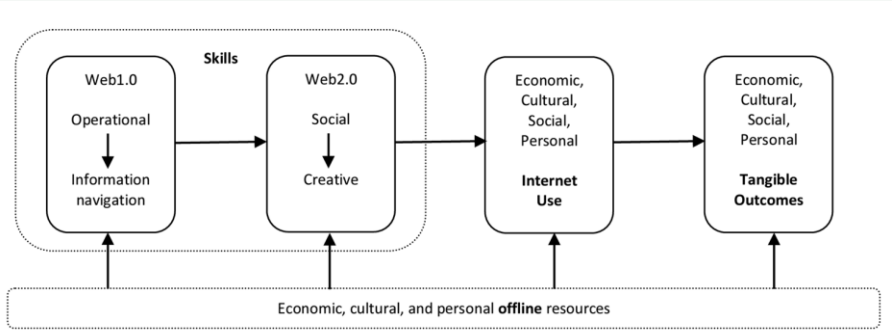


Figure 1. Model of compound and sequential digital exclusion.
Note. Arrows indicate sequential exclusion and boxes compound exclusion

Figure 1. Model of compound and sequential digital exclusion

Sequential Exclusion

Offline resources directly determine digital skills, driving internet usage patterns and final outcomes.

Compound Disadvantage

Inequalities accumulated at early stages (skills/access) compound into broader real-world barriers.

Offline Foundation

Economic, cultural, and personal offline resources form the critical foundation for digital inclusion.

Source: Van Deursen, A.J.A.M., Helsper, E.J., Eynon, R. and van Dijk, J.A.G.M (2017). The compoundness and sequentiality of digital inequality. *International Journal of Communication*, 11. pp. 452-473. ISSN 1932–8036

The Importance of Digital Literacy

Demographic Overlap

Those most likely to experience digital inequity are the same demographics as those most likely to be incarcerated.

Incarceration Deprivation

Supercharged digital exclusion during and post-incarceration due to digital deprivation during incarceration.

Pace of Technology

Technology moves at fast pace—affects even those who serve comparatively “short” sentences.

Online Vulnerability

Formerly incarcerated people more likely to become victims of (online) scams, fraud, identity theft (e.g., Seo et al., 2020).

Digital Record Persistence

“Stickiness” of criminal record due to digital world (e.g., Gurusami, 2019).



Corresponding Fields Model

Intertwined Realms

How offline and online fields of life are closely intertwined in technology-dependent societies.

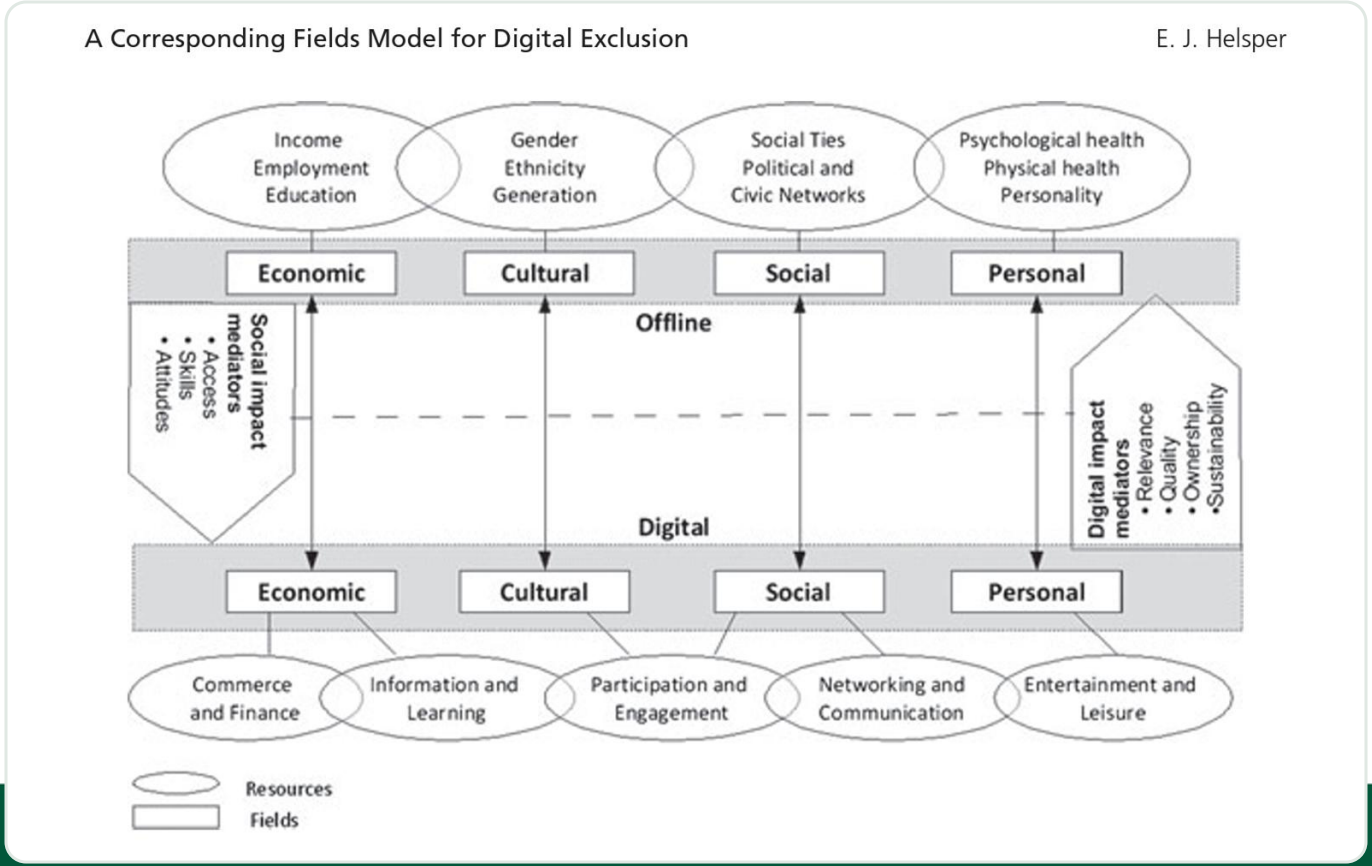
The Four Fields

Four fields—economic, cultural, social, and personal—draw on several resources.

Resource Alignment

Strong link between offline and digital resources in the corresponding fields.

Corresponding Fields Model



Digital Rehabilitation Model

General Assumption

Rehabilitation and reentry process mitigate negative effects of incarceration—at least to some extent—and facilitate return to society.

Impact Across Realms

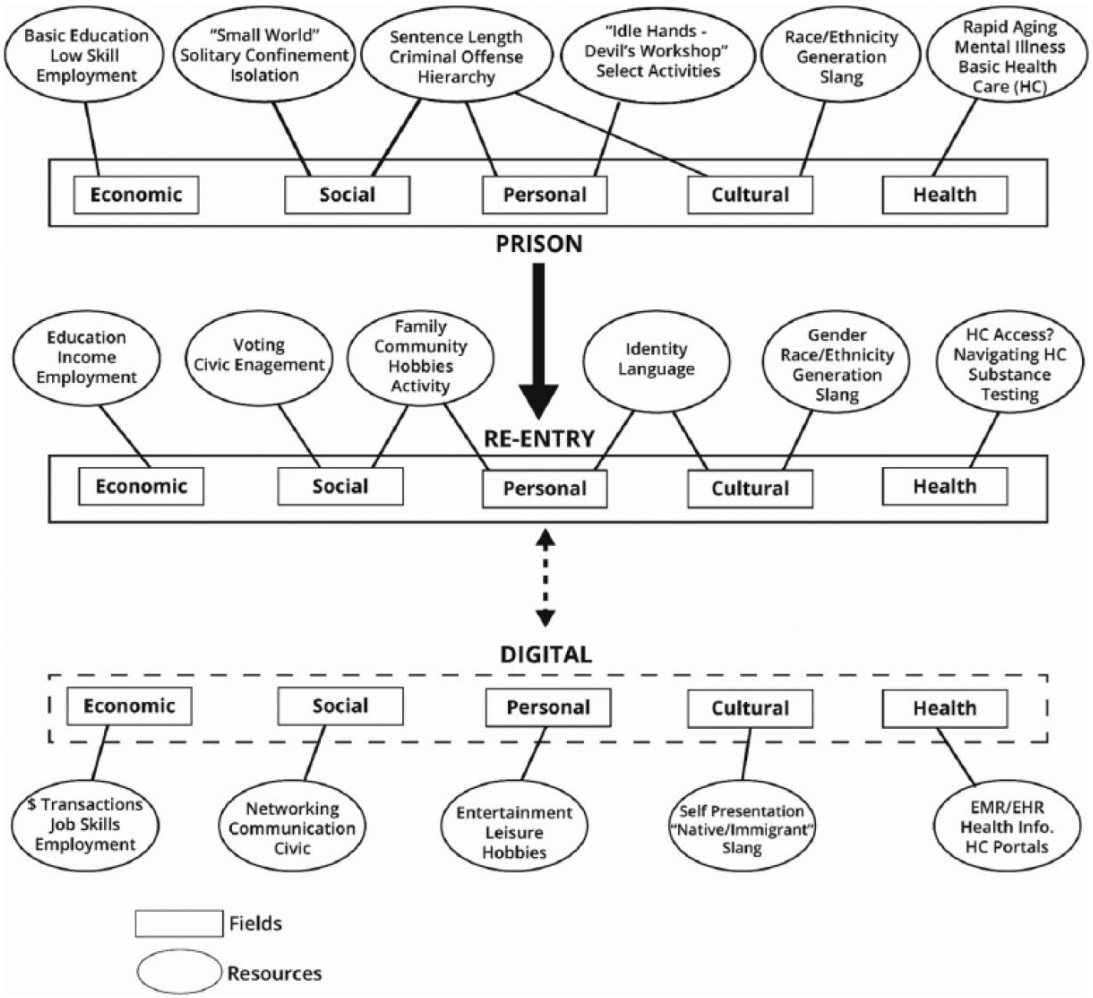
Incarceration has a negative impact on both offline and online realms across all fields identified in Helsper's (2012) model.

Two Offline Realms

Model includes two offline realms: (1) prison realm and (2) reentry realm, as the former directly impacts the latter.

Underutilized Digital Realm

Digital realm is currently underutilized but could yield strong potential positive effects during reentry.



Digital Rehabilitation Model

Research Findings—The Data

2015 • SCOPING STUDY

Northern Ireland / England

3 Prisons Covered

- Currently incarcerated men and women
- Prison administrators
- Correctional officers

2018 • RETURNING CITIZENS

U.S. Midwest

73 Returning Citizens

- Included 67 men and 6 women
- Returned within 3 months of study taking place

2020 • PILOT STUDY

U.S. Southeast

28 Incarcerated / Formerly Incarcerated Men

(Interrupted by COVID-19)

- Digital literacy classes (10h overall) during jail
- Received laptop upon release
- Data collected before/after class & post-incarceration

Research Findings—Core Findings

Access Barriers

Lack of access to internet and devices both during and post-incarceration

- Prison “tablets” are not the same as digital technology on the outside
- Wide proliferation of smartphones post-incarceration, but few computers
- Provided laptop made vast difference

Skills Barriers

Lack of training during incarceration leads to lack of skills upon return

- Even IF computer training was available, quality varied vastly by facility
- BUT: Even basic training (as in 2020 study) increased overall skills and confidence
- Lack of training had large impact during reentry

Support Barriers

Support availability varies across social and family structures

- Support was more readily available for those with strong family ties
- Higher overall digital skills correlated with stronger social support networks

Research Findings—Differences between digital literacy/technology experiences



AGE DIFFERENCES

Younger returning citizens had fewer issues (re)adjusting to digital devices post-incarceration

SENTENCE LENGTH

Strong impact of sentence length—the longer someone had been incarcerated, the more difficulties they experienced

GENDER DIFFERENCES

Men and women described similar struggles, but women reported having more support

RESOURCES vs. RACE

Race did not make a difference, but available resources (income, education, employment, family support structures) did

Research Findings—Most Pressing Issues

Access and skills barriers across four key everyday domains:

Job Search & Applications

- Not being able to create or upload/attach resumes to online applications on phones
- Inability to fill in job applications on computers
- Timing out on library computers during job applications

Finding Permanent Housing

- Many participants lived in temporary housing and were struggling to navigate online sites for rooms or apartments
- Worry about being scammed on online housing platforms

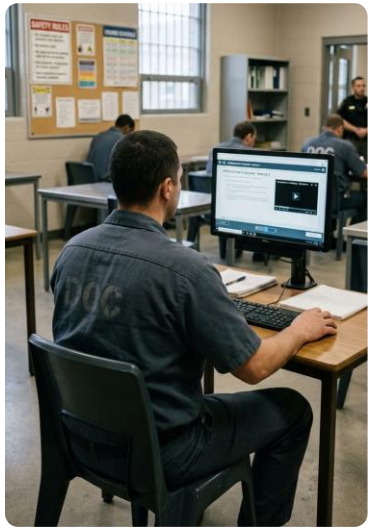
Finding Useful Information

- YouTube was very popular among returning citizens to learn “anything”
- Needed assistance finding relevant and useful content

(Re)connecting on Social Media

- Reconnecting with friends and family members
- Unsure about “code of conduct” on social media—what is ok and what is not

Additional Issues/Barriers



Staff & Administration Dynamics

- Correctional staff can misinterpret or oppose technology adoption, leading to implementation issues, even if approved by administration (e.g., Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016; Reisdorf & Jewkes, 2016)
- Cases of using technology deprivation as punishment or a measure of control
- Cases of *replacing* in-person visits with digital alternatives

Public Perception & "Lesser Eligibility"

- Perception of "lesser eligibility" regarding incarcerated people held by the public
- Perception of internet access as a luxury that should be denied
- Opportunity to educate the public on the value of enhancing digital literacy in correctional facilities for successful reentry (Hadlington & Knight, 2022)

Research Findings—What Works?

Digital Skills Training Works

(at least in the short term)

- Data from our in-jail pilot showed that participants rated their digital skills higher after 1-week class
- Even for skills they were not taught in that class
- Increased overall confidence in digital skills

Provision of Devices Post-Incarceration

- Less worry about “breaking” things for others
- More freedom to try new skills
- Access to information that is helpful for returning citizens

Concerning Trends



False Equivalence of Basic Hardware

- Perception that providing prison tablets is the same as providing comprehensive digital literacy training—it's nowhere close

Monetization of Essential Connection & Learning

- Charging for educational content, entertainment, and connecting with loved ones on prison tablets

Outdated & Theoretical Instruction

- Provision of "digital skills training" on outdated equipment and through books rather than learning by doing

Delayed Intervention Timelines

- Only offering digital skills training post-incarceration

Moving from Rehabilitation to Desistance

Strategic Focus: Long-Term Desistance

- Digital access and skills can aid in transition from just rehabilitation to desistance as a long-term goal.
- Moving from surviving to thriving.
- (Digital) entrepreneurship is one such avenue many U.S. non-profits are now focusing on.

Critical Caveat: Technology Is Not a Fix-All!

- Technology is unavoidable and can be a great tool, but it is not a standalone solution.
- The overall goal has to be to address the social inequities that contribute to criminal offending in the first place!



bianca.reisdorf@charlotte.edu
Bluesky: bibireisdorf.bsky.social