



# THE DIGITAL ERA? ALSO MY ERA!

Media and information literacy: a key to ensure seniors' rights to participate in the digital era



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## Executive summary

### *Ageing in a digital society*

The ageing of our societies is one of the 'megatrends' of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, having a major impact not only on the lives of older people, but also bringing opportunities and challenges for all. Today, almost 20% of the population is over 65; in 2070, that figure will be 30%. How do we organise our societies, based on respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, so that everyone can live and grow old without discrimination? Starting from these questions, we try to find out how a second megatrend - the digital transformation - influences processes and challenges and how we can respond to it. How can digitalisation support active and healthy ageing, improve the quality of life, help to give back independence to older persons to ensure their full participation in society and change the paradigm from 'vulnerable older persons' into 'valuable seniors'. In confronting the megatrends of ageing and digitalisation, Media & Information Literacy (MIL) competences play a key role. We focus on these aspects.

### *Human-centred digitalisation addresses the challenges of demographic change*

Technology is addressing the world's greatest challenges and can provide solutions to demographic change. Both megatrends will only be successful if changes address the daily concerns of people of all generations in an adequate and appropriate way, creating accessible, inclusive, and age-friendly environments that enable everyone to lead healthy and active lives, to meet the daily demands of life and to participate fully in society.

Digitalisation policies should enable all individuals and businesses to move towards a people-centred, sustainable, and more prosperous future. Safeguarding human rights, democracy and the rule of law are essential elements of the digital transition. The conclusions of the Council of the EU of 12 October 2020, "*Human rights, participation and well-being of older people in the age of digitalisation*" and the conclusions of the Ministerial Conference of the Council of Europe "Artificial intelligence - Intelligent politics. Challenges for media and democracy" of 10-11 June 2021, can be seen as reference documents in which government representatives want to ensure that also seniors have at all times the knowledge, skills and awareness regarding their safe and informed access to and exercise of rights in the digital environment.

### *Media and Information Literacy*

Older people, as an important, heterogeneous population group with different needs, educational and learning experiences, have the right to acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to become media literate and information literate in their own way, at their own pace, and according to their own goals. States, media platforms and civil society must enable older users to create and communicate information according to their needs and interests and help them understand the importance of freedom of expression, media freedom and pluralism for democracy. In the digital society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which is creating new ways of political participation, older people also have the right to become empowered citizens; to evaluate critically, use and contribute to information and media content wisely; to understand how to combat hate speech and cyber bullying online; to understand the ethical issues surrounding access to and use of information; and to use media and ICT to work for equality, free speech, and democracy.

### *Time to act*

To date, older adults have received less attention than children and young people in acquiring MIL. For various reasons they were not targeted. *Was it because media literacy has been integrated into formal education for younger generations? The instrumental focus on employability? The lack of clarity about 'who is an older person and how does he/she learn'?* The 'invisibility' of older people in statistic population surveys is a painful fact due to the limitation of 74 years in the exclusion criteria of most surveys. As a result, Media and Information Literacy is not perceived as a lever to secure the human rights of older persons to active and dignified ageing and participation in our digitalised society.

All relevant stakeholders, in particular member states, should recognise their own role and responsibility about media literacy. They should be prepared to lead, participate in and finance long-term MIL projects. This responsibility should be extended to all stakeholders capable of reaching citizens of all age groups where they are today and creating new dissemination networks for MIL knowledge and skills. For all citizens, because in an ever-changing digital society there are no "digital natives" who are ready to respond to everything; at some point we are all immigrants who need support "to grow up" in the digital age.

## Overview of abbreviations

<b>BAGSO</b>	Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Seniorenorganisationen
<b>DESI</b>	Digital Economy and Society Index
<b>FRA</b>	European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights
<b>ICT</b>	Information and communication technologies
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organization
<b>LTCF</b>	Long-term care facilities
<b>MIL</b>	Media and Information Literacy
<b>MIPAA/RIS</b>	Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and its Regional Implementation Strategy
<b>ITU</b>	International Telecommunication Union
<b>OdigO</b>	'The Skilful Tutors of Adults' and Aging Population's Digital Competences to Lapland (OdigO) Project
<b>OEWG</b>	Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing
<b>UNIDOP</b>	International Day of Older Persons
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization
<b>WTISD</b>	World Telecommunication and Information Society Day



## Introduction

Over the years, digitalisation is changing our world and the way we live and work. Inevitably, we have all become part of this digital transformation in our daily lives, both professionally and privately. Digital skills and competences are needed to cope with these changes. Everyone must be able to respond in an appropriate and self-determined way to the needs and requirements of digitisation, regardless of age, educational background, or origin. Media and information literacy, as a key to information, communication, and social participation, is part of governments' responsibility to ensure the right to education, freedom of expression and democracy for all their citizens.

During the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the possibilities of digital information, digital communication and digital tools of all kinds were more crucial than ever before. As the pandemic swept across Europe, the internet was the key to information, to learning, to commerce, to teleworking, to shopping, to gaming and other forms of entertainment, and often a necessary tool for communicating with loved ones, for celebrating, for commemorating, for obtaining information on health and services. Digital connectivity and frequent use of the internet were not only necessary in a professional context, but 'everyone' had to be able to use the internet and be integrated into the digital age.

It became clear that access to the internet should be considered a 'common good', as essential to the common good as electricity or water, and that digital literacy is a crucial key to communication. This is not yet the reality for everyone who needs it, especially for significantly important groups of senior citizens. The increased use of digital tools has demonstrated the potential of digitisation but has also exposed the vulnerability of our societies to new digital inequalities. Digital technologies can help to learn new skills, facilitate social interactions, promote independent and autonomous living, and improve the management and delivery of health and social care for an ageing population. However, not everyone benefits equally. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the inequality of access to digital technologies within and between population groups.

Older people are more likely to be digitally excluded and to experience barriers to accessing goods and services that are increasingly offered online. Digital exclusion limits opportunities for active and healthy ageing, including social and economic participation. The challenge is not only to empower older persons by providing access to digital technologies and increasing digital literacy. There is a need to ensure age-friendly design and relevance of digital services, as well as age-free, ethical, and secure digital environments that embrace the diversity of ageing populations. All this became clear during the Covid-19 pandemic, the lockdowns, and the imposed social boundaries. It is one of the lessons that our society has had taught us and which must be put into practice. The new function that digital communication has assumed for older people has created a new awareness of the need for digital literacy as a key to active ageing, social inclusion, and participation.

More than ever, this new awareness brought the need for media and information literacy (MIL) of the older people to the attention of policy makers. It motivated them to take initiatives without delay to include everyone in the digital, changing society that is ours. It is only through the efforts of many that the doors of literacy open and the wonderful digital world unveils its secrets. Both for my fellow seniors in professions where digital communication was unknown, and for senior professionals for whom assistants and secretaries acted as intermediaries. In the recent times of tele-meetings, it was touching

to regularly see senior citizens who, often with a helping hand from a family member or a befriended neighbour, could get 'back in touch' and stay connected to all that the world has to offer today, longing for direct personal contacts, but in the meantime staying in touch with people and various fields of society.

The fact that the Council of Europe is dealing with senior citizens and media literacy is an expression of the interpretation of this issue as part of ensuring human rights throughout life and in all areas. It is not enough to profess the principle of 'inclusion for all'; concrete initiatives must also be taken. I hope that this report can be a source of inspiration for policy makers, stakeholders and, above all, for the (active) older people themselves. I hope they feel encouraged... and that all stakeholders and policy makers become more aware of the value and rights of the senior citizens and ... of their legitimate expectation that they will receive appropriate support.

To conclude this "journey" through the digital age, viewed through the eyes of seniors, there are many people I would like to thank. Those who brought the digital world into our seniors' associations, the experts in various fields who gave me inspiration and insight, as well as the lifelong learning seniors with no age limit! In addition, I would especially like to thank Michelle and Seán for all their careful technical and linguistic help during this journey, and of course, last but not least, the Council of Europe, which honored me with an invitation to become a consultant on 'seniors and digital literacy'.

**Em. Prof. Dr. An Hermans**

## Digital equity for all

The 21st century is characterised by rapidly expanding digitalisation. Digital technologies can assist in learning new skills, facilitate social interactions, foster independent and autonomous living, and improve the management and delivery of health and social care services. The necessity presented by the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the use of telehealth has been an effective method in delivering health care when face-to-face contact was reduced. However, not everyone benefited equally. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the unequal access to digital technologies across and within populations. How can we understand this lack of opportunities for important groups of the population and how can meaningful participation in the digital world be improved?

### The COVID-19 pandemic: a catalyst for the digital transformation of societies

During the recent COVID-19 pandemic, more than ever before, the opportunities for digital information and digital communication were crucial. As the pandemic swept across all continents, the internet has been the key to information, to learning, to commerce, to telework, to shopping, to gaming and other forms of entertainment. It was often also a necessary tool for communication with loved ones, to celebrate, to commemorate, to get information about health and services.

Digital connectivity and frequent use of the internet were needed not only in a professional context, but ‘all and everyone’ were supposed to be able to use the internet and to be integrated in the digital era. It became clear that the ‘digital revolution’ - the fourth industrial revolution - had no historical precedents and was evolving in an exponential rather than in a linear way. Digitalisation was at the top of the agenda of the 2020 World Economic Forum<sup>1</sup>. Governments, telecom and technology companies from all over the world worked together to initiate immediate measures to help countries remain connected.<sup>2</sup> International organizations called for accelerated private-public sector collaboration to respond jointly to the unprecedented health and economic crises to ensure networks are well-equipped to handle the increase in digital traffic, help countries future-proof their digital capabilities and infrastructure and ensure access to digital services for all.<sup>3</sup> At all political levels, governments were aware that they had to embrace responsibility to develop digital strategies and policies to address the benefits and challenges of the digital transformation of our societies. A human-centred transformation, based on the fundamental rights, freedoms, and values that form the basis of our democratic societies, must ensure a dignified digital inclusion for all in the digital era.

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<sup>1</sup> Fan Z. and Xiao Y. (2020).

<sup>2</sup> Griffin W. and O’Halloran D. (2019).

<sup>3</sup> World Economic Forum (2020), *Digital Development Joint Action Plan and Call for Action COVID-19 Crisis Response* .

### Access to the internet: a priority in rural areas

*“Rural areas in Spain have been suffering for years from the serious problem of depopulation”, says Dr. Carmen Quintanilla, president of Afammer, a non-governmental organization of families and women in the rural environment. ‘Due to a lack of infrastructure and services, many young people leave their villages in search of more dignified living conditions. Our smallest municipalities are ageing, and older people increasingly feel alone and abandoned.*



*Taking advantage of new information and communication technologies to ensure that older persons benefit from their full potential is essential. We must break the digital age divide that our older generations suffer from.’*

Therefore, the Association of Families and Women of the Rural Environment (Afammer) developed the program "Digital lighting for rural areas", with which older persons have learned to use basic aspects of the internet to communicate, inform themselves and even buy. The program "Connect in Rural", will ensure that services such as electronic banking or requesting a medical appointment are daily tasks that any older person in rural areas can perform autonomously.

*“We owe everything to the older generations. We don’t want to leave them behind. We count on civil society, businesses, and governments to support them. It is not only our obligation, but also the hallmark of a better society.”* President Carmen Quintanilla concludes.

(Ciudad Real, 14 March 2022)

## Vulnerable groups and digital divides

The increased use of digital tools has demonstrated the opportunities offered by digitalisation, while also exposing the vulnerability of our societies to new digital inequalities. During the COVID-19 crisis, the digital divides—the gaps between those persons with sufficient knowledge of and access to digital technology and those without, or less access—were widening. They occur unevenly across societies based on gender, geographical location, household-income, and age. The global digital divide is emerging as one of the 21st century’s greatest problems to global equality. More than a third of the world’s population do not use the internet. Most of those who are unconnected live in developing countries, and Africa is the continent with the lowest participation in the digital transformation. Across countries, qualified internet use became a great challenge for children and students from minority groups in schools and universities, for families living in remote regions, for low-income households, for older persons who never acquired digital literacy.

That age is also a ground for differences related to the use of the internet was painfully visible during periods of lockdowns and physical distancing. It was worldwide, from Rovaniemi to Cape Town, that older persons were complaining about their lack of social connections with family and friends, their needs for competences and skills to have successful access to digital information or services.

Of course, older persons as a group are not monolithic with respect to internet usage. Within the population of older adults, internet adoption rates vary by ethnicity, education, and income. However, within each demographic subcategory, older adults have lower rates of internet usage than younger people.<sup>4</sup> They are on the negative side of the digital divide, as the concept not only identifies who uses the internet and who does not, but also measures gradations of digital exclusion. As the internet becomes more integrated into everyday life, people who do not use the internet are increasingly likely to become more disenfranchised and disadvantaged.

The literature attributes the digital divide affecting older adults to the internal characteristics of older adults, such as lower levels of computer literacy, technophobia, lack of perceived usefulness and physical and cognitive deficits. However, it is certainly also "ageism" that contributes to a lower use of the internet by the senior generation.

Ageism is defined as a form of discrimination and prejudice, a stereotype, simply because they are old, marginalizing seniors, treating them with disrespect, and making them feel unwelcome. Cartoons, television, and internet commercials often depict older adults in a negative manner as technophobic, forgetful, dependent, childlike, and sexless. Ageism is a barrier to the equal treatment of older persons and the full enjoyment of their fundamental rights.<sup>5</sup>

**Dunja Mijatović**, Commissioner for Human Rights in the Council of Europe since 2018, defended the protection of the human rights of older people during the COVID-19 pandemic, the incarceration measures, and the risks of social exclusion.



*"Confinement measures are absolutely vital and necessary" she said on 20 March 2020, but she warned of the risk of worsening the 'already burning issue of social isolation of older persons' which has a direct impact on their health status, including mental health. ...The current situation also brings to light the failings of large, institutional settings for the long-term care of older persons, where they are confined in close quarters. Even without the threat of a deadly virus, such institutions often generate numerous human rights violations, including abuse and ill-treatment, notably due to the failure to use a human rights-based approach in the design and delivery of long-term care and a chronic lack of resources."*<sup>A</sup>

<sup>A</sup> Council of Europe (2020), Statement: *Older persons need more support than ever in the age of the Covid-19 pandemic*, Strasbourg, available at: [www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/older-persons-need-more-support-than-ever-in-the-age-of-the-covid-19-pandemic](http://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/older-persons-need-more-support-than-ever-in-the-age-of-the-covid-19-pandemic), accessed 9 May 2022.

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<sup>4</sup> McDonough C. (2016).

<sup>5</sup> Butler R. N. (1969).

## From normative framework into implementation

Digital integration is a crucial condition to ensure older persons' rights to participate today. The concepts of ageing and the interpretation of the rights of seniors were subject to a whole evolution during recent decades, going from attitudes of protection towards older persons towards a human rights approach ensuring the active participation of all in an ever-changing society.

## World-wide attention to ageing societies

Ageing, demographic change and ageing societies appear on the agenda of international institutions and governments at all levels since almost 50 years. During the second half of the 20th century, life expectancy increased for both women and men. The phenomenon of 'ageing societies' was due to an increasing number of persons reaching an advanced age and a decrease in birth-rates. These ongoing demographic changes presented opportunities and challenges for policymaking and society-building at all levels.

Scientific research highlighted a changing self-consciousness in older generations that disproved many stereotypes about an inevitable decline with age. A paradigm change about ageing was introduced: the notion of "successful ageing" was increasingly being identified with the so-called "active ageing" paradigm. The concept was used in political strategies and engaged the post-war cohorts, healthy and educated – the so-called young old or new seniors – moving towards retirement.

The UN General Assembly, in resolution 33/52 of 14 December 1978, recognised the need to call world-wide attention to the serious problems of the older generation, a growing portion of the world's population, and decided to organize a **World Assembly on Ageing** in consultation with Member States, specialized agencies and organizations concerned, like the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Health Organization (WHO). This was held in Vienna in 1982 and was meant to be a forum to launch an international action program aimed at guaranteeing economic and social security to older persons, as well as opportunities to contribute to national development.

The **Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing** was the first international instrument on ageing, providing a basis for the formulation of policies and actions. It included recommendations for action addressing research, data collection and analysis, training, and education, as well as the following sectoral areas: health and nutrition, protection of consumers, housing and environment, family, social welfare, income security and employment, and education. The aim of the Plan of Action was to strengthen the capacities of governments and civil society to deal effectively with the ageing of populations and to address the developmental potential and needs of older persons. It became the breeding ground for further action plans, new institutions, and strategies to date.

**United Nations Principles for Older Persons** are organised around the following themes:

- Independence
- Participation
- Self-fulfilment
- Dignity
- Care

They reflect the need to strike a balance between integrating older people into society while acknowledging their special needs.

It was adopted by General Assembly resolution 46/91 of 16 December 1991.<sup>A</sup>

<sup>A</sup> United Nations Principles for Older, available at:

[www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/olderpersons.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/olderpersons.pdf).

Together with the UN Principles for Older Persons, 1991, the **Political Declaration and the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002**, the first specific international standards regarding older persons, ageing and related policies, were adopted.

In accordance with the conventions, recommendations and resolutions of other specialized UN entities, the obligation of all States to respect, protect and fulfil all human rights and fundamental freedoms, and guided by the **Charter of the United Nations** and the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, a normative framework for the development of ageing policies at a national level was available. It was further developed and adapted until today. International agencies created appropriate instruments and responded to changes and challenges within their competences. They illustrate and indicate how normative frameworks are built up, implemented, or changed.

Recently the promotion of a global fight against ageism was initiated, in relation to *the 'Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing' (OEWG)*, established on 21 December 2010 by the UN General Assembly (resolution 65/182). The working group is considering the existing international framework of the human rights of older persons and identifies possible gaps and how best to address them, including by considering the feasibility of further instruments and measures as appropriate.<sup>6</sup>

A general overview of the ideas and legislative initiatives of the UN and other international bodies like the EU, Council of Europe, WHO, and some evaluating interpretations of national governments and NGO's, has been extensively compiled, analysed and published (2021) as **'Against Ageism and Towards Active Social Citizenship for Older Persons'**.<sup>7</sup> Although the focus is on the evaluation and future of the European Social Charter for the development of and ensuring the human rights of older persons, the publication ranges broadly and deeply into the general development of concepts of ageing, demographic change and the rights of older persons. As the authors of 'Against Ageism and Towards Active Social Citizenship for Older Persons' used questionnaires with 'open' questions sent to governments and human rights institutions, it was possible to search for the influence of the COVID-19

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<sup>6</sup> United Nations (2022), *12th Session of the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing*.

<sup>7</sup> Doron I. and Quinn G. (2021).



pandemic and in particular the use and need of digital technology to guarantee the social inclusion of older persons in society. While several countries mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic as a 'crystallization' of the problems older persons experience in long-term care facilities (LTCF), in the answers from two countries, namely Bulgaria and Hungary, the need to promote digital communication and to fight against the "digital divide" are highlighted.

### **The challenge to cope with an ever-changing society**

Did it all start with the awareness raised during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the lessons learned about the digitisation of our societies, that the need for digital inclusion and MIL was emphasized? No, although the impact of the COVID-19 crisis can hardly be overestimated, with fundamental dynamics that had been at work for a long time, and incremental adjustments suddenly becoming highly urgent. Responsible reactions - both political and social - could not wait. This is certainly true for the acceleration of facilitation processes to enable seniors to participate in the digital transformation of our societies. As it was stated by the Council of Europe in the **Recommendation CM/Rec (2014)2, of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the promotion of human rights of older persons (19 February 2014)**: existing international human rights standards and normative frameworks need to be implemented and 'additional efforts should be made to assess the protection gaps....'<sup>8</sup>. This means that general strategies and mainstreaming initiatives are never-ending stories, open to integrate new aspects to be embedded permanently in the general strategy.

*Surveying European and international policy decisions and guidelines on the digital inclusion of seniors in recent years, here are some relevant aspects:*

- In 2010 the EU launched '**A Digital Agenda for Europa**'.<sup>9</sup> One of the actions was: 'Enhancing digital literacy, skills and inclusion', not only for professional training, employability and to achieve economic growth, but to include everyone in the digital era. '*It is about empowerment and emancipation, for learning, creating, participating and being confident and discerning in the use of digital media,*' the authors stated, '*and to carry out daily tasks online, from applying for a job to paying taxes or booking tickets...*' The Commission promoted several programs and initiatives also for older persons - aged 65 to 74 years old, people on low incomes, the unemployed and the less educated, intending to bridge the digital divide. But it seems that in this decade (2010-2020), the intensive promotion of ICT courses to acquire the required digital skills and competences - like the Austrian project "Digitalisation for All" (Digitalisierung für Alle)<sup>10</sup> - was rather exceptional. This may also be apparent from the general report and the country reports of the UNECE Ministerial Conference on Ageing 'A sustainable Society for all

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<sup>8</sup> Council of Europe (2014): In 2014, the Committee of Ministers proposed to take several initiatives to implement the existing human rights and principles for older persons and mentioned that after 5 years an evaluation should take place. All the information received was published in 'Promotion of Human Rights of Older person pictures, the 'legal machinery' installed in several member states to guarantee and implement older persons' human rights, and a broad range of good practices related to these rights. Related to the „Autonomy and Participation” principal, Poland described an operational program 'Digital Poland 2017 – 2020' with a special budget committed to promoting digital inclusion of older persons to organize and develop digital skills (using the internet and internet-related services like e-gov application, instant messaging etc.) for persons over 65, with priority given to persons living in rural areas.

<sup>9</sup> European Commission (2010), *A Digital Agenda for Europe* .

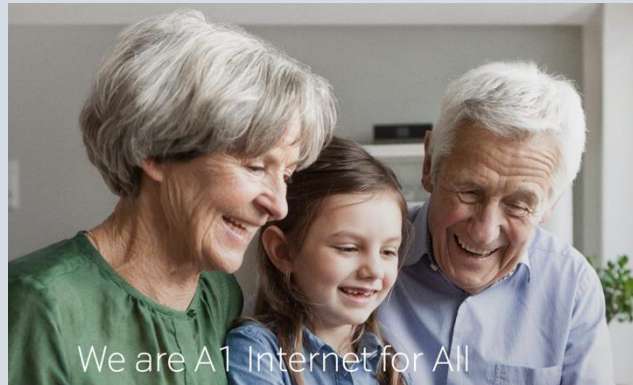
<sup>10</sup> Sponsored by the Federal Ministry for Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection and in cooperation with the Austrian Institute for Applied Telecommunications- and started in 2018.



ages/ Realizing the potential of living longer' (Lisbon, Portugal, 21- 22 September 2017). The conference completed the third review and appraisal cycle (2012-2017) of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and its Regional Implementation Strategy (MIPAA/RIS), but the digital transformation of society and digital literacy were not issues.<sup>11</sup> The fourth review will be held in Rome, on 16-17 June 2022.<sup>12</sup>

### Local seniors' groups - driving forces for the dissemination of digital literacy

Since 1995, the regional organization of the Österreichischer Seniorenbund (Austrian Seniors' Association) started its "Computer & Internet Courses for Seniors" in the capital Vienna, which are still running successfully. In the decades up to 2010, other regional Seniorenbund organizations followed, first Salzburg, Upper Austria, and Lower Austria – so that today, all 9



regions offer training for senior citizens to achieve individual internet skills. At that time, the biggest mobile phone and internet provider A1 took over sponsorship for such activities and provided technical support as well as learning materials to the local Seniorenbund groups. In 2011, A1 started "A1 Internet for All" (Internet für alle) in which national seniors' organizations participated actively. A Parallel to that, the Austrian government created a nationwide initiative "fit4internet" in 2018 which offers training courses for the generation of 60plus, organized together with the Austrian senior citizens' organisations.<sup>B</sup>

Heinz K. Becker, former Secretary general of the Österreichischer Seniorenbund: the motive to create initiatives in the use of internet over 25 years ago was to open a kind of "new window to the world" to the generation who could not develop digital skills in their professional life. The primary insight was that these competences would become an indispensable cultural technique, as important as writing and reading. Currently, these digital skills training courses cover more than 4.000 local seniors' groups. It is the very local structure of the Austrian seniors' organizations, with their membership coverage in nearly every larger village or smaller town, which forms the background that Austrian older generations had a great chance to develop and improve their digital literacy over the last 30 years'.

<sup>A</sup> Haberfelner, A. (2018) We are A1 Internet for All, A1 Stories, available at: [www.a1stories.com/blog/we-are-a1-internet-for-all/](http://www.a1stories.com/blog/we-are-a1-internet-for-all/), accessed 15 May 2022.

<sup>B</sup> Korosec, I. (n.d), Interview: "Die Digitalisierung ist für uns alle so wichtig!", OSB, available at: [www.seniorenbund.at/wissenswertes/interview-die-digitalisierung-ist-fuer-uns-alle-so-wichtig](http://www.seniorenbund.at/wissenswertes/interview-die-digitalisierung-ist-fuer-uns-alle-so-wichtig), accessed 15 May 2022.

- Considering the enormous changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, in line with previous options and aware of the need for accelerated actions, the EU recently launched several new plans. One of them is the **2030 Digital Compass**.<sup>13</sup> It translates the EU's digital ambitions for 2030 into concrete terms. It revolves around four main pillars: skills,

<sup>11</sup> UNECE (2017), *Ministerial Conference on Ageing: A Sustainable Society for All Ages: Realizing the potential of living longer*.

<sup>12</sup> UNECE (n.d.), *Standing Working Group on Ageing*.

<sup>13</sup> European Commission (2021), *2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade*.

government, infrastructure, and business. The first pillar - a digitally skilled population - advances the target on basic digital skills for a minimum of 80% of the population to have basic digital skills. Aims and actions directly focused on older persons are not included. It is up to the Member States to implement the objectives, with financial support from the EU.

*The following highlighted aspects are more clearly focused on an overall strategy of demographic change and the importance of the digital inclusion of older people:*

- The appointment of Dubravka Šuica as Vice-President of the Commission in charge of demography and democracy,<sup>14</sup> the decision to integrate ageing policies into all policy areas and the introduction of a 'life-cycle approach', which shows how childhood experiences and socio-economic inequalities accumulated throughout a person's life continue into old age, are important building blocks for a common policy to address the many challenges of demographic change, taking into account the differences and difficulties between and within regions.

**Dubravka Šuica**, Vice-president for Democracy and Demography in the EU Commission (2019-2024) in a keynote speech on “The Conference on the Future of Europe and challenges and opportunities of ageing in Europe” co-hosted by the University of Maribor and the Republic of Slovenia, holding the Presidency of the European Council (29 November 2021): *“From the moment we are born, we are ageing. It is essential that we foster understanding, solidarity, and responsibility, but also knowledge sharing between generations. By building a constructive narrative around demographic change, and ageing, we are reinforcing our communities and our democracy, making them fit for the future...In my role, I focus on the whole life cycle, from the rights of children to those of older people. Ageing is not just a matter for older people. Everyone is impacted directly by the prospect of living a longer life, including the young. Ageing creates both challenges and opportunities for our economies, our society and our democracy.”*<sup>A</sup>



<sup>A</sup> [ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/suica/announcements/vice-president-suica-delivers-keynote-speech-videoconference-event-conference-future-europe-and\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/suica/announcements/vice-president-suica-delivers-keynote-speech-videoconference-event-conference-future-europe-and_en)

- Most relevant were the **EU Council Conclusions "Human rights, participation and the well-being of older people in the age of digitalisation" (12 October 2020)**<sup>15</sup> and the **Trio Presidency Conclusions: Trio Declaration on Active Ageing: Germany, Portugal and Slovenia**, the Member States holding the presidency of the Council of the European Union during 18-month period from July 2020 to December 2021. These EU Council conclusions, delivered in autumn 2020 in response to the first wave of COVID-19, state that older people are suffering, both from the virus and from social constraints, and welcome the EU's turn towards adopting a human rights approach in ageing policies, as well as a major push for Member States regarding ageing policies in general and the digital inclusion of older people. These EU Council

<sup>14</sup> European Commission (n.d), *Dubravka Šuica*.

<sup>15</sup> European Council (2020), *Improving the well-being of older persons in the era of digitalisation: Council adopts conclusions*.

conclusions are extremely interesting if we look at them in their broader social and political context, and not as if they just 'happened' to fall from the sky or were written in a Brussels office. Although we cannot make an in-depth analysis of the decision-making process - which is certainly worth doing - we will only mention a few aspects:

The Federal Government's reporting is based on a decision of the German Bundestag in 1994. Once in each legislative period another subject is chosen, and the reports are drawn up by independent experts. This time it was digitalisation. More recently, in August 2020 while Germany had the presidency of the EU Council, BAGSO published a statement<sup>16</sup> regarding the "Eighth Government Report on Older People"<sup>17</sup>, focusing on older people and digitalisation. Among its comments and criticisms, BAGSO expressed that it "*regrets that the subject of digital education and skills development is not given appropriate attention in the Eighth Government Report on Older People, even though promoting technology and media literacy is a key prerequisite to facilitate access for older people to digital opportunities and enable them to make informed choices on how to use them*".<sup>18</sup>

**BAGSO** (*Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Seniorenorganisationen*), the German National Association of Senior Citizens' Organizations, is an umbrella organization of about 120 civil society organizations and has since several years been aware of the importance of initiatives to improve the digital inclusion of all and of senior persons. In 2017, BAGSO published a position paper 'Older persons in a digital world'.<sup>A</sup> The focus was set on embedding the usage of internet in the daily lives of seniors. It identified potential obstacles and the required measures to enable the positive opportunities offered by an internet that is accessible and safe for all.

The effects of the digitisation process on life in old age can be seen in the fields of housing, care, mobility, and health, as well as in the creation of social spaces. An Expert Commission has identified the digital technologies relevant to all these areas of life, singled out emerging new developments and assessed how such developments are having an impact on life in old age. The results of their deliberations can be seen in the above-mentioned report. As the Expert Commission presented the report already in January 2020, the effects of the COVID-19 crisis were not considered. In particular the need to be digitally connected, in situations of social isolation and lockdowns was to come from March 2020 on. Nevertheless, the influence of this report, the discussions, and presentations around the coincidence with the pandemic crisis and the responsibility of the German government, holding the Presidency of the Council of the EU, was certainly important for further developments of the vision about 'older persons and digitalisation' in Germany and in Europe.<sup>B</sup>

<sup>A</sup> BAGSO (2019), *Older people in a digital world*, available at: [www.bagso.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/bagso/06\\_Veroeffentlichungen/2020/BAGSO\\_Position\\_Paper\\_Older\\_persons\\_in\\_a\\_digital\\_world.pdf](http://www.bagso.de/fileadmin/user_upload/bagso/06_Veroeffentlichungen/2020/BAGSO_Position_Paper_Older_persons_in_a_digital_world.pdf), accessed 18 April 2022.

<sup>B</sup> AGE Platform Europe (2020), *Strengthening Older People's Rights in Times of Digitalisation - Lessons learned from COVID-19 - Joint German Ministry-AGE-BAGSO online conference*, available at: [www.age-platform.eu/event/strengthening-older-people's-rights-times-digitalisation---lessons-learned-covid-19](http://www.age-platform.eu/event/strengthening-older-people's-rights-times-digitalisation---lessons-learned-covid-19), accessed 18 April 2022.

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<sup>16</sup> BAGSO (2020), *Older people and digitalisation*.

<sup>17</sup> Bundesministerium für familie senioren frauen und jugend (2020), *Achter Altersbericht - Ältere Menschen und Digitalisierung*.

<sup>18</sup> BAGSO (2020), *Older people and digitalisation*.

*Below we list some relevant initiatives supported by the German government, by the Federal Ministry for Families, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ):*

- The project “*Digitaler Engel - sicher, praktisch, hilfsbereit*” (Digital Angel - secure, useful, helpful)<sup>19</sup> and the service point “*Digitalisierung und Bildung für ältere Menschen*” (Digitalisation and Education for Senior Citizens), aims to foster the active participation of older people in our society and enable them to lead self-determined lives in an increasingly digitalised society.
- The bus of the mobile team of advisers - “*Digitaler Engel*” (Digital Angels) has been touring throughout Germany – albeit limited during the COVID-19 pandemic - to provide older people with personal, real-life, and on-the-spot support in the competent use of digital services.<sup>20</sup> Personal conversations help to present digital services to answer specific questions and to reduce fears. The “Digital Angels” cooperate closely with existing local structures, such as *Mehrgenerationenhäuser* (multi-generational centres) and *Seniorenbüros* (senior citizens' agencies). Rural areas remain their focus.
- Since several years, BAGSO argued that people in the post-professional phase of life must be structurally and financially supported in acquiring digital literacy skills, like young people and students. In 2021 a ‘*Digitalpakt Alter*’ (Digital Pact for Older People) was launched. Around 100 ‘*Erfahrungsorten*’ have been created and more than 6 000 older people have been able to enlarge their digital competences.<sup>21</sup>

*“The coronavirus pandemic has made the subject more topical than ever. During this period of social distancing and restrictions on going out, many older people have learnt to recognise the opportunities offered by digital communication and information technologies and have been making greater use of them than ever before. One only must think, for example, of all the video calls made with family members, all the digital neighbourhood platforms created to organize mutual help and support, and all the doctor’s appointments now increasingly taking place via video link. The pandemic has however also made it clear that not all older people have the infrastructure required to participate digitally in society. All too often they lack not only the necessary knowledge, but also the financial means to purchase digital equipment”.<sup>A</sup>*

*Dr. Franziska Giffey, Federal Minister for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, Foreword, Eighth Report on Older People, Older People and Digitization.*

<sup>A</sup> Bundesministerium für familie senioren frauen und jugend (2020), *Older People and Digitization*, available at: [www.bmfsfj.de/resource/blob/159708/ed36ad230d6038b9f0a439fb03ddf35b/achter-altersbericht-kurzfassung-englisch-data.pdf](http://www.bmfsfj.de/resource/blob/159708/ed36ad230d6038b9f0a439fb03ddf35b/achter-altersbericht-kurzfassung-englisch-data.pdf), accessed 18 April 2022.



<sup>19</sup> Digitaler Engel (n.d.), *Über das Projekt*.

<sup>20</sup> Bundesministerium für familie senioren frauen und jugend (2019), “*Digitaler Engel*” *startet Deutschlandtour*.

<sup>21</sup> Digitalpakt Alter, (n.d.), *Über uns*.

## Digital Equity for all: a common global perspective

On 14 December 1990, the United Nations General Assembly (by resolution 45/106) designated **1 October** as **the International Day of Older Persons (UNIDOP)**. With ‘Digital Equity for all’ as the theme of the 2021 edition,<sup>22</sup> the UNIDOP expressed the need for access to and meaningful participation in the digital world for all and for the older generation. According to UNECE<sup>23</sup> it requires action to:

- Ensure equal access to goods and services involving digital technology, through participatory design and policy initiatives that render online services such as e-Government, e-banking, e-commerce, e-learning and tele-health services available, accessible, affordable, and user-friendly, while maintaining continued off-line access.
- Enhance digital literacy to reduce the digital skills gaps by providing training to navigate digital environments safely and securely, including intergenerational and peer learning opportunities, as well as measures that tackle ageism, to encourage digital engagement among older persons.
- Leverage the potential of digital technologies for active and healthy ageing, well-being and empowerment of older persons including through digital communications that can reduce loneliness and social isolation, and digital technologies that can foster opportunities for independent living in advanced age.
- Ensure the protection of human rights of older persons in the digital era by creating ethical, transparent, and safe digital environments and services through policies that protect the dignity, autonomy, and privacy, as well as the free and informed consent to the use of digital technology.

This means that digital literacy is an important aspect of ensuring the digital inclusion of older people, but that the conditions and expected results of training to acquire digital literacy are part of the wider living environment. Moreover, the acquisition of digital literacy requires several political measures by political decision-makers. Reducing the digital age gap, increasing digital inclusion and the active participation of older people depends on the respect and role that older people are given in the society of which they are a part. Digital literacy should be considered as one of the most important cultural needs, just like reading and writing, opening a window on the world, on knowledge and information, as well as on culture and entertainment, according to the individual interests and needs of each citizen. Moreover, digital literacy is a key to a critical understanding of media and information and to participation in digital social and political platforms. It is a lever for digital participation in democracy.

## Media and Information Literacy: the key to participate in the digital era

The awareness of the need for digital Media and Information Literacy (MIL) already led to stimulating initiatives since the last decades of the 20th century. With the aim of optimising the digital competence of all population groups, governments, internet services, schools, all kinds of civil society groups created initiatives for several population groups (students, teachers, professionals in media,

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<sup>22</sup> UNDESA DISD (2021), *Digital Equity for All Ages - United Nations International Day of Older Persons 2021 (UNIDOP)*.

<sup>23</sup> UNECE Working Group on Ageing (2021), *Ageing in the digital Era*.



information, production, and administration...), often highlighting the principle of 'digital inclusion for all'. In research and strategies concerning digital inclusion and digital capacity building however, older persons as a group are regularly excluded. As more and more services are going online, older people need MIL and are expected to have the necessary skills to function in a digitally transformed environment; if not, they risk being excluded. How can we understand this position of older persons and how can we meet this need?

## Older persons' use of the internet

Although age is a frequently used category in all kinds of surveys, we do not know that much about the internet use of older people. At least not about older people over 74. The reason is that in research aimed at "all age groups", the "oldest" age group of the research group is usually the 65-74 age group. This was also the case recently in "Shaping Europe's Digital Future" with detailed thematic and country-specific analyses, but always for and within research groups of 16–74-year-olds.<sup>24</sup> Isn't the non-inclusion of the over 74s an omission? When researchers are looking for information on the attitudes and behaviour of 'a whole population' and present their results as of 'the' population, 'all age groups', 'digital inclusion of all' etc., can people over 74 be overlooked?

Of course, we welcome and value research on younger specific groups. No one can deny that research on capacity building is necessary in relation to job opportunities and the economic growth of our industries and services, but.... we cannot leave the ageing generation over 74 behind as if it "does not exist" and is not worthy of research or interpretation compared to the other age groups. However, there is a need for a comprehensive study covering 'all age groups'.

This is what the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) did in 2020 to meet the request of the German Presidency of the Council of the EU at that time. The Agency prepared a background paper in support of the **conference "Strengthening the rights of older people in times of digitalisation"**. Although the methodology of the survey was rather complicated, the Agency was able to involve almost 35 000 people aged 16 and over - including those aged 75 and over.<sup>25</sup> The main findings are certainly relevant:

- The digital divide between generations is significant and it increases with age. The 2019 Fundamental Rights Survey shows that 20% of persons aged 75 years and older in the survey use the internet at least occasionally, whereas 98% of 16-29-year-olds do;
- In terms of their age, internet users and non-internet users are diametrically opposed: older people are over-represented among those not using the internet, younger people are over-represented among internet users when looking at the population;
- Among internet users, frequency of use of the internet decreases with age;

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<sup>24</sup> European Commission (2021), *The Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI)*.

<sup>25</sup> FRA (2020), *Selected findings on age and digitalisation from FRA's Fundamental Rights*.

- The results show that education plays an important role in the use of the internet among people of all ages, but older age groups with higher levels of education correspond to greater internet use;
- Starting at age 45, a clear pattern of the use of the internet can be observed: among older age groups the internet is used most often for social contacts and to look for information about public services, and less often for online banking and shopping, which differs from the patterns of internet use among younger people;
- Non-internet users perceive their main obstacles to using the internet as their lack of necessary skills, followed by a lack of interest (when the same things can be done without using the internet), and having no access to the internet.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, physical distancing requirements posed a particular challenge for older people, many of whom live alone and do not always have the equipment or knowledge to use digital tools to maintain social contacts. Older people have been severely affected by the pandemic, especially those who live in LTC facilities or have underlying health conditions.<sup>26</sup>

Physical distance should not lead to social isolation. Social contacts are necessary to maintain people's health and well-being. Being cut off from family and friends exacerbates feelings of loneliness and vulnerability in older people, especially those who are digitally excluded. In the context of increasing digitalisation of services, it is almost impossible for people who are not digitally literate to access public services in many EU countries. The **FRA's 2021 Fundamental Rights Report** highlights the importance of using a rights-based approach to ageing and reflecting this approach in all relevant initiatives and policies, including in actions to promote social inclusion policies.<sup>27</sup> In a new research conducted from 2022 on "Ageing in digital societies", the FRA will collect data on the extent and nature of provision for older people about their access to online and offline public services. It will use a fundamental rights perspective to ensure that rights are enforceable in practice.<sup>28</sup>

## Older persons: not a target group for media literacy projects

In parallel with the digital transformation of the development of our society and the digitalisation of media and information, which accelerated during the COVID-19 crisis, our societies have in recent years assumed that everyone and anyone could participate in the digital environment. With internet access, the use of PCs, phones, and other digital devices, the necessary so-called '21st century knowledge' and digital skills, every citizen was supposed to be part of the digital age.

MIL is the key to a better understanding and use of media and information and to an active participation in the digital age. It is a complex concept introduced by UNESCO in 2007, encompassing a body of knowledge, skills, attitudes, competences, and practices that enable people to effectively access, analyse, critically evaluate, interpret, use, create and disseminate information and media products on a creative, legal, and ethical basis using existing resources and tools.<sup>29</sup> MIL provides the

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<sup>26</sup> FRA (2021), *Fundamental rights report*.

<sup>27</sup> FRA (2021), *Fundamental rights report*.

<sup>28</sup> FRA (n.d.), *2021-2023 FRA Programming Document*.

<sup>29</sup> UNESCO (2022), *About Media and Information Literacy*.

backbone for understanding media and the role of media in our society. It provides the necessary concepts and attitudes to evaluate and respond to disinformation, hate speech, fake-news, and information distortion. It provides some of the essential skills needed for critical thinking, analysis, self-expression, and creativity - all necessary skills for citizens in a democratic society.

It is not only children and students in schools and universities or men and women seeking to improve their employability who need the necessary digital competences to ensure resilient and successful development in their professional and social lives. Mastering digital literacy has become a key component for everyone and throughout life to participate fully in society. Also, for older generations.<sup>30</sup> This presupposes that our societies will address the obstacles that limit the digital inclusiveness of older people and that a successful match will be created between two global trends that are causing profound changes worldwide: the rise of digital technologies and demographic ageing. MIL can contribute to the empowerment of older people as active digital citizens and ensure the development of digitally inclusive communities that contribute to the well-being of all generations. But that is not yet the case. At present, older people benefit only to a limited extent from the opportunities offered by digitalisation. Moreover, they are not a priority in terms of education and training initiatives related to digital literacy, which have been offered extensively in recent years. This, indeed, is what several studies carried out at European level reveal:

- **‘Mapping of media literacy practices and actions in EU-28’**, brought in 2016 an extensive overview of projects, established by a variety of institutions but excluding schools.<sup>31</sup> The researchers received a collection of 517 projects, and analysed 154 ‘case study’ projects, advanced by the country experts as ‘most significant projects’. The results and conclusions of the research are very enlightening on the topic of MIL projects for older persons. They found that only 7 of the 145 ‘case-study’ projects were focusing on MIL for older persons. The five countries - *out of the 28 EU member states in 2016* - that submitted a project that recorded targeting ‘Older People’ were Belgium (FL), Estonia, Greece, Luxembourg, and Spain. Although this study did not include curricular-based media literacy projects in schools, 80 of the 145 ‘case study’ projects targeted the broad audience group of ‘Teens and older students’. At the other end of the scale, only 7 of the 145 ‘case-study’ projects targeted the audience group of ‘Older People’. The authors concluded: *‘This finding might perhaps pose questions about the level of support available for older people to develop media literacy skills, especially in the context of increasing numbers of older people becoming digitally engaged and using online platforms and services’*.

This was a formulation that was repeatedly put forward in previous decades: the principles of digital inclusion and MIL for all are recognised. But the exercise of putting these principles into practice is so limited that ‘the match’ between the ageing generations, embracing the digital transformation, falls short.

- Similar conclusions were detected in the results of the survey on quality journalism in the digital age, conducted in 2019 and intended to point out the role of MIL related to the goals and challenges of quality journalism in the digital age.<sup>32</sup> The study analyses some 70 MIL

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<sup>30</sup> UNESCO (2021), *Digital Literacy for Older Persons*.

<sup>31</sup> Nikoltchev S. (2016), *Mapping of media literacy practices and actions in EU-28*.

<sup>32</sup> Chapman M. and Oermann M. (2020), *Council of Europe study DGI(2020)1*.



projects aimed at developing MIL skills and knowledge that help the public to recognise and value quality journalism. The rapporteurs typify the MIL-landscape as very diverse and put forward as one of their findings: *'Over 65s may be at risk of being under-served by MIL initiatives. A significant obstacle to reaching an older audience with media literacy tools and training may be the absence of a readily available dissemination network (such as schools are for younger people)'*. The rapporteurs concluded: *'As a result, there appears to be a lack of media literacy training and tools aimed at older people,'*<sup>33</sup> and highly recommend: *'...To create media literacy programmes that help citizens of all age groups...'*<sup>34</sup>

- The publication **"Media Literacy for All - Supporting marginalised groups through community media"**<sup>35</sup>, which was used as a background document during the World Café on the Community Media Sector and introduced by Martina Chapman at the Council of Europe Ministerial Conference on 11 June 2021, also identified a lack of initiatives aimed at older people. In the study presented, the target audience of the projects and activities was very varied, targeting all ages between 8 and 65+; 80% of the projects target marginalised communities; 90% target the 40-65 age group. Only a minority of the projects analysed had over-65 as one of their target groups, but in all cases over-65s were part of a general adult audience or a public audience.
- As Media literacy not only concerns learning processes about the use and understanding of information, but also concerns misinformation, the European Regulators for Audiovisual Media Services (ERGA) conducted, together with media companies and educational organizations, several surveys, and campaigns about the critical understanding of information. Despite their efforts, the 2020 report stated: *"one of the biggest challenges, (...) is the question of how to reach the widest possible range of target groups in society, especially elderly people";* the ERGA expert group did not find any good practice in Europe.<sup>36</sup>

It is not only research on overviews of practice that echoes the limited attention given to older people as a target group for MIL.<sup>37</sup> The academic research on the usefulness, significance, and didactic approaches of MIL for all age groups clearly identifies a lack of research on media use, understanding and critical practice among older people.<sup>38</sup> In the adult education sector, it is recognised that online learning is 'changing places and spaces of learning' and that various consequences of the megatrend of digitisation are still awaiting a response from educators and researchers. The openness to abandoning traditional stereotypes about the learning capacities and interests of older people and the identification of their capacities as 'important facilitators of intergenerational learning, particularly in supporting older people who want to improve their computer skills' can be seen as a hopeful perspective.<sup>39</sup> A hopeful perspective that the research and adult education sectors cannot fulfil on their own. They are counting on politicians to play their part, not only by putting forward the principles

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<sup>33</sup> Chapman M. and Oermann M. (2020), *Council of Europe study DGI(2020)1*, p.24.

<sup>34</sup> Chapman M. and Oermann M. (2020), *Council of Europe study DGI(2020)1* p.4.

<sup>35</sup> Chapman et al. (2020), *Media literacy for all - Supporting marginalised groups through community media*

<sup>36</sup> ERGA (2021), *Improving Media Literacy campaigns on disinformation*.

<sup>37</sup> Chapman et al. (2020), *Media literacy for all - Supporting marginalised groups through community media*.

<sup>38</sup> Rasi et al. (2019), *Media Literacy Education for All Ages*.

<sup>39</sup> Jütte, W., & Wildemeersch, D. (2017). *Editorial: digital the new normal - multiple challenges for the education and learning of adults*.

of digital inclusion for all, but also by supporting concrete projects for internet use, media literacy and participation in online social communication.<sup>40</sup>

The EU Council conclusions of 12 October 2020<sup>41</sup> and the conclusions and resolutions on the changing media and information environment adopted at the **Council of Europe Ministerial Conference of Ministers responsible for Media and Information Society** (Cyprus 10-11 June 2021) may be a good start for future implementation. Based on the value of inclusive societies and the well-being of older people, European governments stress the need to emphasize the right of older people to participate in the digitalised society. Recognising the importance of MIL projects and their contribution to a sustainable, independent, democratic media environment and a culture of reliable quality journalism, they support the empowerment of individuals to critically engage with media content, navigate the complex media and information ecosystem and make their own political and other choices. The Council of Europe strongly supports the empowerment of individuals to *"critically engage with media content, navigate the complex media and information ecosystem and, ultimately, make their own political and other choices in an autonomous manner"*.<sup>42</sup>

### World Telecommunication and Information Society Day (WTISD) 2022 Celebration

has been celebrated annually every 17 May since 1969 to mark the founding of ITU and the signing of the first International Telegraph Convention in 1865. The aim of WTISD is to raise awareness of the opportunities that the use of the Internet and other information and communication technologies (ICT) can bring to societies and economies. It is also intended to help reduce the digital divide.

*"Equitable access to digital technologies isn't just a moral responsibility, it's essential for global prosperity and sustainability"*- Mr. Houlin Zhao Secretary-General International Telecommunication Union (ITU)<sup>A</sup>

<sup>A</sup> WISS Forum 2022 (2022) World Telecommunication and Information Society Day (WTISD) 2022 Celebration, available at: [www.itu.int/net4/wsis/forum/2022/Agenda/Session/133](http://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/forum/2022/Agenda/Session/133), accessed 15 May 2022.



## Time to act

Acquiring MIL as a key to enabling older people to be part of the digital transformation involving our societies and all aspects of life can be seen as a complex communication and learning process. This learning process, often involving the design of communication between individuals, is a 'crystallization moment' in which two megatrends, digitalisation, and ageing, meet.

The learning process of older people to become digitally media literate is a step-by-step performance process that results in personal competences and has important implications for the society in which

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<sup>40</sup> König R. et al. (2018). *Internet use among older Europeans: an analysis based on SHARE data*.

<sup>41</sup> European Council (2020), *Improving the well-being of older persons in the era of digitalisation: Council adopts conclusions*.

<sup>42</sup> Artificial Intelligence – Intelligent Politics (2021), *Resolution: Conference of Ministers of the Council of Europe responsible for Media and Information Society*.

we live. Becoming digital citizens means being able to participate online and offline in the society we live in and to exercise our democratic rights. For digital learning is not just 'learning the digital technology of the internet' it is, as Paola Freire (1921-1997) long ago taught about all learning: it is "reading the world and reading the word".<sup>43</sup>

In this "time to act" we will highlight some aspects of the process of MIL among older people, while bridging the previous chapters and providing some building blocks for new initiatives.

## Older persons' learning: engaging into 'a new world', without forgetting one's life history

Having reliable access to the use of ICTs is an important premise to engage in and benefit from digital communication, but it is not enough. Knowledge, attitudes, and digital skills are needed to take part in and adjust to technological opportunities. To engage in this 'new and ever-changing adventure', it must be clear how and why the key to MIL opens a window to instruments and possibilities to act successfully in the digital environment. It is not only about being online, but about skills and confidence.<sup>44</sup>

### Older people need to become media and information literacy ambassadors themselves

*"Digital literacy training for the elderly focuses mainly on skills to use digital tools but falls short when it comes to understanding digital content"* says Estelle Huchet of Age Platform Europe, an EU-funded network of nearly 150 organizations of/for older people.<sup>A</sup> Several initiatives need to be organized to improve media literacy in all age



groups, but especially among the elderly. She refers to a recent international project DIGITOL, supported by ERASMUS+, which has led to several good practices and learning procedures that can inspire others. Age Platform Europe aims to highlight intergenerational solidarity, intergenerational learning, and non-formal learning. An important prerequisite for successful, effective learning from digital communication and understanding misinformation and fake news is the involvement of older people in policy creation to ensure that what is on offer meets their needs. AGE Platform Europe, stresses that we need to be many to strengthen accurate information and empower older people to become media and information literacy ambassadors themselves.

<sup>A</sup> Age Platform Europe (2020), *Disinformation and COVID-19: a matter of concern for older people?*, available at: [www.age-platform.eu/policy-work/news/disinformation-and-covid-19-matter-concern-older-people](http://www.age-platform.eu/policy-work/news/disinformation-and-covid-19-matter-concern-older-people), accessed 22 April 2022.

Cartoon: Available at: [www.shutterstock.com/nl/image-vector/vector-cartoon-illustration-group-old-senior-1154738665](http://www.shutterstock.com/nl/image-vector/vector-cartoon-illustration-group-old-senior-1154738665), accessed 8 May 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Freire P. (1985), *Reading the World and Reading the Word: An Interview with Paulo Freire*.

<sup>44</sup> Centre for ageing better (2021), *COVID-19 and the digital divide*.

## How to foster media literacy education

A lot of reports and articles are available about how to foster media-literacy education among older persons. A systematic review of 40 empirical studies published between 2005 and 2019 has recently been published.<sup>45</sup> Although older persons often start to learn the use of online communication for a very specific purpose (communication with a friend, a relative in another country, the necessity to get e-health information...), step by step the digital environment is broadening. Starting from a basic use, progressing to understand and create media content and being aware of the need for critical analysis of news, advertising, entertainment, misinformation to make deliberated choices and finally to act and participate as a conscient citizen in a new digital environment representing the political and social context we live in. Research points out that older persons, in particular persons who never used online communication during their professional life, show difficulties to understand, analyse and evaluate media content, including the trustworthiness of online news.

As older persons are a very heterogeneous group, each person having specific life experiences, influencing their ability and interest in media literacy, the pedagogical approach also needs to be adapted. Moreover, there are not only the formal interventions during a certain 'learning process', but there is also the need for regular support. In this regard, the notion of 'the warm expert'<sup>46</sup> was advanced, and overall, social networks are very important to encourage each other and move forward together. This means that civil society is playing an important role in fostering media literacy initiatives for older persons and that, in the end everyone can share his/her experiences to help and support a relative or a fellow citizen.

### Strengthening digital skills among all population groups

In Cyprus, the Deputy Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digital Policy is implementing a "National Digital Skills Action Plan 2021-2025", with a total budget of more than €24 million, which is included in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan and partially funded by the EU. Special attention is paid to vulnerable groups and the elderly population over 55. The Cyprus Productivity Centre, set up in cooperation with the Ministry, offers educational programmes to the elderly in areas such as the use of electronic devices and software, knowledge of social media, e-government tools and systems, communication platforms, etc. A National Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition will be officially launched soon and will consist of more than 50 public and private stakeholders in the field of education and training. A digital platform for the coalition is currently being developed as part of a pan-European project receiving funding through the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF Digital) programme, which will support and catalyse both public and private investment in digital connectivity.<sup>A</sup>

Antonios Demetriades, President of the Welfare Committee of the Parliament of Senior Citizens in Cyprus: "The government cannot wait to take initiatives to introduce and include senior citizens in the digital age. It is a responsibility for the whole of society. We must prevent seniors from living alone and isolated; digital exclusion is often intertwined with social exclusion. As seniors, we invest in social networks as a guarantee that no one is left behind".

<sup>A</sup> European Commission (n.d.) Connecting Europe Facility — CEF Digital, available at: [digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/activities/cef-digital](https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/activities/cef-digital), accessed on 8 May 2022.

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<sup>45</sup> Rasi et al. (2021), *Promoting Media Literacy Among Older People: A Systematic Review*.

<sup>46</sup> Martinez C. et Olsson T. (2022), *The warm expert—A warm teacher? Learning about digital media in intergenerational interaction*.

## **From the simple use of digital devices to the active and creative use of media content as a citizen**

The above ambition of providers of media literacy for older people and of educators and coaches was less visible in the results of the published articles. Most attention was paid to the 'first stage' learning of communication techniques and the use of online communication in the personal and family circle. Nevertheless, the ambition is open and more and more intensive exploration is advised. Moreover - as the researchers themselves point out - the overview and the available articles reflect only a small part of the reality and the struggle for media literacy education. It is possible that the recent necessity of online meetings; online participation platforms, surveys etc. have also boosted the use of online communication aimed at social and political participation as citizens. Especially in social networks at national or international level, members are motivated to improve their competences to be able to communicate and be heard.<sup>47 48</sup>

## **Freedom of expression and MIL - Building blocks for democracy**

Freedom of opinion and expression are fundamental rights of every human being. Indispensable for individual dignity and fulfilment, they also constitute essential foundations for democracy, rule of law, peace, stability, sustainable development, and participation in society. They are essential for the development and enjoyment of a wide range of other human rights, including freedom of association and assembly, freedom of thought, religion or belief, the right to education, the right to take part in cultural life, the right to vote and all other political rights related to participation in public affairs. Democracy cannot exist without them.

States have an obligation to respect, protect and promote the rights to freedom of opinion and expression. They must be ensured in online as well as in offline environments. Massive digitalisation in recent years has had a substantial impact on the media landscape and the exercise of freedom of expression and other human rights<sup>49</sup> The internet has radically changed the way we access information and communicate. Machines and social media platforms have largely taken over the role of traditional media. Large sections of the public are turning to social media as their main source of information. However, there are also new opportunities for individual development and the strengthening of democracy. Everyone has the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of their choice and to express themselves online and access information. Free and pluralistic media can play different roles, including creating platforms for debate and deliberation, helping to inform and empower citizens, enhancing transparency and democratic accountability, often also acting as a public watchdog, educator, advocate for good governance and even as a catalyst for democracy.

Journalists, publishers, editors, bloggers, and other media actors must be able to carry out their tasks without fear of intervention or reprisal; this requires adequate protection against violence, threats and pressure. Ensuring this protection is important not only for media actors, but also for users, their self-development, autonomy, and development opportunities.

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<sup>47</sup> Age Platform Europe (2020), *Digital literacy of older people: an overview*.

<sup>48</sup> ESU (2021), *Statement: Older persons and digital inclusion in today's information society*.

<sup>49</sup> Council of Europe (2021), *Conference of Ministers responsible for Media and Information Society*.

As cornerstones of a democratic society, freedom of expression and freedom of the media must respond to an informed, active, and engaged citizenry, bridging and activating citizens and decision-makers. Media and information education should address all members of society and enable them to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to play an active role in the public sphere. Governments at all levels, media providers, civil society associations, all stakeholders should feel responsible for providing everyone with the necessary tools to use the potential of media and information. Digital learning strategies must be an integral part of a learner-centered, age-appropriate approach, as older people need appropriate and targeted policies, without which they are likely to suffer most from the digital transformation.

Digital competences provide opportunities for people of all ages to participate in society and have a greater say in political decision-making; develop technical, cognitive and social skills and competences that enable everyone to understand, critically analyse and evaluate media content; develop the ability to protect one's privacy in the public sphere; make informed decisions based on a critical analysis of content and media and the environment; understand the ethical implications of media and new technologies and create content in the new media environment. Through appropriate capacity-building initiatives, governments and all stakeholders should support the development among older people.<sup>50</sup> The Council of Europe works with governments, the private sector, civil society, and other actors to shape the internet as a safe and open environment where freedom of expression, assembly and association, diversity, culture, and education can flourish.<sup>51</sup>

### **Gerontoludics: all about joyful 'learning by playing'**

To improve the media and information skills of older people, we certainly need to explore new formats, without taking the traditional school and formal education institutions as a model. How can we create facilities for people with health problems, who live alone and have less experience with communication? How do we create challenging communication that can interest and stimulate them to learn and practice the use of online devices? This was the starting point for Prof. Bob De Schutter a few years ago, fascinated by video games and at the same time interested in sharing the pleasure he experienced with older family members.<sup>52</sup>

Bob De Schutter gained his first experience with the function of video games for older adults by observing older family members and establishing that the stereotypical image of the older person as "not interested in playing, lonely and bored" was not correct. Together with his grandmother, he developed a video game based on her experiences in an old farmhouse in the countryside of the Flemish Kempen (Belgium) where she lived as a child during World War II.<sup>53</sup> Step by step, De Schutter conducted more research, developed more insights, obtained his doctorate, and became one of the leading experts in the field of learning through play, the richness of intergenerational contacts, internal game motivation, social and intellectual learning effects.

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<sup>50</sup> Penninckx P. (2021), powerpoint on: '*Digital society : challenges, opportunities, risks and obstacles*'.

<sup>51</sup> Council of Europe (n.d.), *Safeguarding human rights on the net*.

<sup>52</sup> Bob De Schutter (n.d.), *Bio*.

<sup>53</sup> Batchelor J. (2019), *Immortalising your grandmother in a WWII game*.

He further researched the literature on game design and ageing to develop a design approach that considers the multifaceted nature of ageing and the intrinsic value of digital games. The resulting 'Gerontoludic Design Framework' proposes meaningful play as the intended outcome of game design for older adults. De Schutter argues for a "player-centred design approach, and a game framework in which older people recognise telling topics (recent memories, age-related problems...).

As a game designer, university professor and speaker at conferences and exhibitions, Bob De Schutter opposes the stereotyping of older video gamers and defends "a new view" of older people as a very diverse group, with different skills and interests. He emphasises the role of games throughout the life cycle. This experience and vision give Bob De Schutter a special place among scholars developing tools for older audiences and their fight against ageism.<sup>54</sup>

## How to cope with misinformation and 'fake news'

Our contemporary media and information societies are characterised by an "abundance" of information, often an overload of both online and offline information. The rise of social media, Facebook, Twitter... has radically changed the production of news and contributes to the rapid spread of various forms of "fake news" and different types of disinformation.

Cases of misinformation, disinformation and malicious information can be found in many scenarios and affect the democratic public sphere. Moreover, disinformation campaigns in private chat groups are used as a political strategy, such as during the 2016 presidential election campaign in the United States, the Brexit campaigns of 2015-2016 in the United Kingdom,<sup>55</sup> and recently the war in Ukraine.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on Thursday 24 February 2022 was fuelled by a massive campaign of disinformation that continues as the conflict escalates. It was promptly dismantled by experts and fact-checkers, but in the meantime a dangerous disorder of information has emerged.

Another global process of (mis)information was related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since April 2020, when it became clear that the entire world was suffering from an unprecedented pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) has been at the forefront of the fight against the pandemic, and in the fight against an 'infodemic', by disseminating scientifically substantiated information while trying to dispel myths. At the time of the COVID-19 health crisis, the spread of the "infodemic" was considered as dangerous to public health and safety as the pandemic itself. The UN Secretary-General was quoted as saying: "As COVID-19 spreads, a tsunami of misinformation, hatred, scapegoating and panic-mongering has been unleashed".

The use of false, incorrect, and misleading information is considered a new influencing strategy that has a direct impact on the public social sphere. Phenomena of false, incorrect, and misleading information grow as diverse and different as individuals, communities and policy makers create them. These opportunities to create, examine and edit information are part of the democratisation of access

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<sup>54</sup> TEDx Talks (2015), *How games are changing the way we age* | Bob De Schutter | TEDxMiamiUniversity.

<sup>55</sup> Höller M. (2021), *The human component in social media and fake news: the performance of UK opinion leaders on Twitter during the Brexit campaign*.



to knowledge and freedom of expression. On the other hand, they should not endanger that freedom of expression by "occupying" the whole space and closing it off to other opinions. The debunking of fake news, the search for the correction of false reports and the appreciation of the truth must always be ensured.<sup>56</sup> It concerns not only journalists and professional information providers, young people, and students, but everyone, all citizens.

### **Propaganda and disinformation: powerful weapons in wartime**

The mis-, dis-, mal-information we are flooded with regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine is enormous. Although it had never such dimensions, the use of misinformation and propaganda, as weapons of warfare, is not new. It has a long history. The problem has existed since time immemorial. History is full of examples where "fake" was passed for "real". The Trojan horse, a mythological archetype of deception, symbolically links classical antiquity to the very contemporary problems of our internet-dominated world.

Propaganda and deception are never so visible and dangerous as in wartime. Guns, tanks, and bombs kill and exterminate people and societies. But at the same time, there is a propaganda warfare that seizes hearts and minds and 'kills' civilians too. It is more aggressive than in the past, partly because it is heavily influenced by disinformation campaigns via the internet and mobile phones and it is also very diffuse, as new techniques such as Artificial intelligence (AI)-powered audio, image, and video synthesis - so-called deep fakes - make it difficult to distinguish deep fakes from reality.

In these complex times, during which journalists and media are called to find and tell the truths that are visible to them, knowing that at the other end of the communication process citizens are looking for reliable information, it is not easy to achieve balanced reporting and to make conscientious decisions on how to meet these demands. Moreover, understanding, researching, and evaluating war-related media content requires a literate audience.<sup>57</sup>

It is called a "hybrid warfare" in a joint statement for Ukraine (Perugia, 3 April 2022) that expresses support for both Ukrainian and international journalists and independent media that play a vital role in "covering Russia's aggression against Ukraine". It calls on governments and stakeholders to condemn Russia's attack on press freedom and the harassment of independent journalism, which denies citizens the right to access the truth. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has once again underlined the essential role of independent, ethical journalism in helping citizens make vital decisions, informing the world and holding the powerful to account.<sup>58</sup>

### **Misinformation affecting our daily behaviour**

Older adults are concerned about this information disorder. The spread of misinformation can mislead people about how to behave in the event of illness or danger, reduce trust in the media and increase

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<sup>56</sup> Council of Europe (n.d.), *Dealing with propaganda, misinformation and fake news*.

<sup>57</sup> Committee of Ministers (2022), *Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)4 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on promoting a favourable environment for quality journalism in the digital age*.

<sup>58</sup> European Federation of Journalists (2022), *Perugia Declaration for Ukraine: the targeting, torturing and killing of journalists must be stopped*.



anxiety. As digital illiteracy is still less prevalent among the seniors than in other age groups, this could be one of the reasons why adults aged 65 and over are more likely to believe and share fake news.<sup>59</sup> This attitude of relying on fake news can depend on several causes that are often interrelated.

### **In some parts of the world, the use of the internet is hampered by language barriers**

Armenia is one of those countries belonging to a global language minority. For older people, the dependence on a foreign language is a remarkable barrier.

Armenian is an Indo-European language without strong ties to other languages and with a unique script that dates to the fifth century. For many people, Armenian is a heritage language spoken in the household, while they use another language at school and at work. English has become a popular second language choice, but education in the English language was and is not available to everyone. As a result, a digital divide is currently visible between often young, English-speaking, and Western-oriented individuals and older Armenians. How to bridge this gap between socio-demographic groups? How can we create opportunities to ensure digital inclusion for all?

One of the disappointments of today's seniors in post-Soviet countries is that they once worked tirelessly to develop the economy of the USSR, expecting the country to provide them with a decent pension. After the collapse of the USSR, however, their quid pro quo ceased to exist. The new states have not taken over the obligations of the former USSR. The average pension in Armenia is very low, even after several pension reforms. Many Armenian pensioners must continue working informally to supplement their income.<sup>A</sup>

Hovsep Khurshudyan, president of the NGO "Free Citizen" Civic Initiatives Support Centre, who is a member of the Armenian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and a former spokesman of the Armenian Heritage Party, finds the situation regarding media literacy among the older generation in Armenia rather deplorable. Knowledge of languages is only one of the factors.

*Hovsep: "The older generation mainly speaks Russian, which was the state language of the USSR. Older people can usually only use Russian to reach some external information sources. These Russian-language media are usually controlled by the Russian authorities and contain political propaganda against the West, against Europe and the US, to influence public opinion negatively. The seniors are at risk of falling victim to various conspiracy theories. For example, propaganda against vaccination".*

Hovsep Khurshudyan felt this in his family when his mother refused to be vaccinated in early 2021, after listening to (mis-)information spreading manipulative and deliberately false stories and arguments against vaccination. As a result, in June 2021, at the age of 81, she contracted Covid-19 and suffered greatly. It was only when she felt that Covid-19 was not only real but could have very serious consequences for life and health that she agreed to be vaccinated. But it was too late; her health, which had been quite strong in the early years, was undermined. Hovsep's cheerful, active mother, with four children, nine grandchildren and two great-grandchildren, died at the end of 2021, on 23 December...

*Hovsep: "Meanwhile, large-scale social and cultural projects are needed to integrate the seniors in all areas of the country's activities. Especially in the field of education, including media literacy. Usually, older people depend on their children and grandchildren to help them access the internet and teach them the basic skills. However, not all older people have a computer at home or have a personal smartphone..."*

<sup>A</sup> Huitfeldt H. (2020), Towards Better Adequacy & Sustainability: A Review of Pension Systems & Pension Reforms in Eastern Partnership Countries, Economic and Financial Affairs, Discussion Paper 131, available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/economy-finance/dp131\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/economy-finance/dp131_en.pdf), accessed 8 May 2022.

<sup>59</sup> Age Platform Europe (2020), *Disinformation and COVID-19: a matter of concern for older people?*

## Age-friendly media literacy education: the OdigO-project in Lapland (Finland)

‘Being able to use an Iphone, not only to make phone calls, but also to take pictures, to send them to family, to meet up with friends, to prepare the program of a next meeting of our association, to communicate about a book I have read, or a debate I followed... There is a panorama of factors that determines whether I can do this, whether I have learned it and whether I am supported further.’ Older people need this support to develop and participate in society.

The project we propose in the following pages illustrates this and tries to meet the needs of older persons to participate in the digital media and information environment. The answer: an age-friendly media literacy education, in which many factors and partners play a role, some in an indirect way, others in a direct way: Finland, at the top of rankings on the digital transformation of society; high qualified research on media and education; an active civil society; explorative attitudes to invest in sustainable long-term projects...

### Finland at the top of international rankings

Finland is at the top of European and international rankings on the digital transformation of our societies. The Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI, 2021), an annual report published by the European Commission that monitors EU Member States’ digital progress in four principal policy areas - human capital, connectivity, integration of digital technology and digital public services - ranks Finland among the best in their list.<sup>60</sup> Finland ranks 2<sup>nd</sup> (after Denmark) of the 27 EU Member States in the overall ranking and leads in human capital, integration of digital technology and digital public services.<sup>61</sup>

Finland ranks 1st out of 27 EU countries in terms of human capital, which, according to the report, means that the level of its digital skills is well above the EU average. Here are some characteristics:

- 76% of the population have basic digital skills and 50% have above-basic skills (against EU average levels of 56% and 31%, respectively);
- The proportion of employed people working as ICT specialists has increased to 7.6%;
- The proportion of female ICT specialists is slightly above the EU average, at 23% (EU 19%);
- ICT graduates in Finland account for 7% of the total number of graduates, close to twice the EU average (3.6%);
- Almost twice the number of enterprises in Finland provide ICT training to their employees compared to the EU average;
- In 2020, Finland was managing successfully the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis in schools and universities by a prompting a replacement of in-person schooling with distance learning and organising several digitalisation projects;
- Special projects promoting opportunities for working-age people to develop their competences and support the availability of skilled labour.

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<sup>60</sup> European Commission (2021), *The Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI)*.

<sup>61</sup> European Commission (2021), *Finland in the Digital Economy and Society Index*.

Reading Finland's DESI-report 2021, we are particularly interested in the results about the digital inclusion of older people. What about the digital transformation of society and coping with an ageing population? However, the design of the study does not permit learning about older persons above 75 years-old; they are out of the picture; persons over 74 are not included in the study. The population studied is based on the Eurostat statistics and is the proportion of people between 16 and 74. Is this not a significant omission? Should the ageing population not be seen as "part of the entire society" in research on the level of digital literacy and in reports like DESI? Especially since in Finland, too, governments at different levels, internet service providers, universities and civil society associations have been concerned about the integration of seniors, as part of the population, into the ever-changing digital society.

### **Project OdigO: Osaavia aikuisten ja ikääntyvien digitaitojen ohjaajia Lappiin**

In Finland, media literacy became a tradition at the beginning of the 2010s as part of Finnish citizenship competence. It was not just about skills for using the internet, but also about the ability to handle media critically. The Finnish government saw the need to increase the population's resilience to digital misinformation. The Finnish national media education policy is implemented by the National Audiovisual Institute and the Ministry of Education and Culture in cooperation with media education professionals. It has started in schools. Media and digital literacy skills were anchored in Finland's national curriculum. Older adults also became a target group<sup>62</sup>.

One of the inspiring projects is OdigO: "The Skillful Tutors of Adults' and Aging Population's Digital Competences to Lapland (OdigO) Project".<sup>63</sup> The OdigO project can be seen as a cross-sectoral approach between universities (the University of Lapland, Finland, and implemented in cooperation with the Lapland University of Applied Sciences), experts and non-governmental organizations. The project's premise is that competent teachers and tutors in the fields of health, social care and education are in key positions to provide equal opportunities for developing digital competence regardless of age. The ability to learn remains throughout life, although the needs and goals of learning change. High quality guidance is needed also in such learning contexts that do not strive to achieve formal degrees or quantifiable study credits. As teaching and tutoring genuinely respond to individual interests or needs arising from an individual's life course, the results of learning and teaching are not necessarily quantitatively measurable but are equally valuable. The guidance for digital skills should be integrated into educational, cultural, social, and health services, which is why the project will develop the digital competences of those working in these fields.

The OdigO-project develops an online course focusing on adults' and older people's digital skills and tutoring. The course is included in several study programs in the participating Universities' curricula and open to students in continuing education. Additionally, the project organises a series of webinars and video briefings targeted at participating Universities' teaching staff, the public as well as educational, social, health, and cultural professionals who work with adults and older people. In this sense the project creates exchange opportunities for people from different ages and institutions, with

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<sup>62</sup> Palsa L. and Salomaa S. (2019), *Media literacy in Finland*.

<sup>63</sup> Susanna R. and Rasi P. (n.d.), *The Skillful Tutors of Adults' and Aging Population's Digital Competences to Lapland (OdigO) Project*.

different competences and responsibilities to develop a common perspective to improve older persons' competences in MIL. The expectation that all those who in one way or another want to and can give assistance and support to older persons' digital participation in society, makes this project 'an appeal' to social responsibility across generations and functions.<sup>64</sup>

## Looking Ahead

Recent policy documents from international organizations have solemnly emphasized 'digital equity for all' and 'no one will be left behind'. However, these 'promises' do not seem to have been realized for older generations, who feel isolated and forgotten in today's ever-changing society. This is especially true for the participation of the senior generations in the digital age. Looking at the results of surveys on the practice of using the Internet, projects on media and information skills, it sounds like a refrain: older people are not or less than other age groups involved in digital communication. Governments and various services assume that 'everyone' communicates online and is skilled to do so, but the behaviour of older people does not confirm this and until recently, little effort has been made to strengthen that knowledge and skills among the older generations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it became poignantly clear: in this 'digital age', a lack of digital skills leads to digital exclusion and consequently to social exclusion. It was an eye-opener for everyone involved in the welfare of older people and who strives to ensure the right of older people to participate in all areas of society.

By the end of 2020, this urgent need of senior citizens seemed to have been understood. The conclusions of the Council of the EU of 12 October 2020 "Human rights, participation and well-being of older people in the age of digitalisation" and the conclusions of the Ministerial Conference of the Council of Europe on "Artificial intelligence - Intelligent politics. Challenges and opportunities for media and democracy" of 10-11 June 2021 can be seen as reference documents in which government representatives seek to ensure that also seniors always have the knowledge, skills and awareness regarding their safe and informed access to and exercise of rights in the digital environment.

However, these statements are not enough. They must be operational and applied in the policy-making and daily practice of the digitalization of society. How can the rights of seniors to fully participate in our society be guaranteed, how can seniors be part of the digital society we live in, and how can we all - governments, services, businesses, civil society organizations, seniors themselves - create an inclusive, age-friendly society, eliminating ageism and harnessing the capabilities of all generations?

The ageing of our societies is one of the "megatrends" of the 21st century, not only having a major impact on the lives of the older people, but also bringing opportunities and challenges for all. Today, almost 20% of the population is over 65; in 2070, it will be 30%. How do we organise our societies, based on respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, so that everyone can live and grow old without being discriminated against?

Starting from these questions, we tried to find out how a second megatrend - the digital transformation - affects processes and challenges and how we can respond to it. How can digitisation support active

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<sup>64</sup> We thank Professor Dr. Päivi Rasi and University Lecturer, Adjunct Professor Dr. Hanna Vuojärvi, from the Faculty of Education at the University of Lapland, Dr. Susanna Rivinen, project manager of OdigO; and Leena Jääskeläinen vice-member of the city Council of Rovaniemi and the many others who enthusiastically help build this project and share their experiences.

and healthy ageing, improve quality of life, help seniors regain their independence and ensure that ageing in a digital world can change the paradigm from vulnerable to valuable? Both megatrends will only be successful if changes adequately and appropriately address the daily concerns of people of all generations, creating accessible, inclusive, and age-friendly environments that enable everyone to lead healthy and active lives, meet the daily demands of life and fully participate in society.

In confronting these two megatrends, MIL plays a key role. MIL is a lever to reach, understand and participate in digital media and information society. It means acquiring a set of skills to search for, critically evaluate, use, and contribute to information and media content wisely; knowing one's rights online and how to protect private data; understanding how to combat hate speech and cyberbullying online; understanding the ethical aspects of accessing and using information; having the competences to participate in digital platforms; being able to use media and ICT to promote equality, free speech, democracy, peace....

Older people, as an important heterogeneous population group with different needs and educational and learning experiences, have the right to acquire, in their own way, at their own pace and according to their own goals, the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to become media and information literate. All relevant stakeholders, in particular States, should recognise their own role and responsibility about media literacy. They should be prepared to lead, participate in and finance long-term MIL projects. This responsibility should be extended to all stakeholders capable of reaching citizens of all age groups where they are today and creating new dissemination networks for MIL knowledge and skills. For all citizens, because in an ever-changing digital society there are no "digital natives" who are ready to respond to everything; at some point we are all immigrants who need support "to grow up" in the digital age.

It is not easy to draw up a list of recommendations on "how to act", although it is "time to act". In our report, we have included results of research, reflections, and information on good practices that we have encountered or had the opportunity to participate in over the years. In conclusion, I would like to highlight just **three principles that are important for walking the digital MIL road together with seniors, towards active participation in a trustworthy, people-centred digital society**, which we hope to share with the future generation:

- **MIL should be seen from the perspective of human rights.** In the digital age, media literacy is a prerequisite for personal development, autonomy, participation in society. Therefore, in accordance with Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2022\)4](#) on promoting a favourable environment for quality journalism in the digital age, MIL initiatives for all age groups - not only children and youth - that promote the skills and knowledge necessary to recognise and appreciate quality journalism, or that illustrate the benefits of quality journalism for various target groups and for democratic and pluralistic societies should receive maximum support from States.
- **Policies on ageing, including digital learning and media and information literacy, need to be mainstreamed and involve all parts of society.** As MIL initiatives, which focus on the use of skills and competences can be seen as a complex lifelong learning process, it is necessary to respectfully consider the older learner and his/her life history. Everyone involved in MIL with older learners is called to explore new tools and methods, both in the digital and in the "real life" social field. While international organizations provide the general framework, national, regional, and local governments, civil society, non-formal education, and in particular multi-

generational social units of families & neighbourhoods can play an important role in responding to the needs and expectations of seniors and ... providing a variety of joyful mutual learning situations, not only in the digital field but also in the "real" warm social field.

- **Senior citizens are an integrated part of the population of a society. Also men and women over 75 years old.** We understand the society of 'longevity' and the increasing life expectancy as a positive result of medical science and a growing healthier lifestyle... However, where are men and women aged over 75 in population surveys and in Eurostat statistics? The exclusion of older people (+75) in surveys must be understood as discrimination, as an act of ageism. The 'invisibility' of older people in static population surveys is a painful fact due to the limitation of 74 years in the exclusion criteria of most surveys. As a result, seniors over 75 are excluded from surveys about digital transformation of societies, digital human capital, etc. At the end, Media, and Information Literacy (MIL) is not perceived as a lever to secure the human rights of older persons to active and dignified ageing and participation in our digitalised society.

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