Towards an active and competent participation of all in resilient digital societies:

THE NEED OF MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY FOR ALL AGE GROUPS

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Introduction

Over the years, digital technology has changed our world and the way we live. During the recent COVID-19 pandemic, more than ever before, digital information, digital communication and all kinds of digital instruments were crucial. Unavoidably we have all become part of this digital transformation and this is why digital education has become a categorical imperative in the digital age.

It became clear that access to the Internet must be considered as "a common good," equally essential to the public good as electricity or water. As the pandemic swept across Europe, the internet has been the key to information, to learning, to commerce, to telework, to shopping, to gaming and other forms of entertainment. But also, access to the internet has been necessary 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. This is not yet the reality for everyone who needs it, in particular for considerably important groups of seniors. The increased use of digital tools has demonstrated the opportunities offered by digitalization, while also exposing the vulnerability of our societies to new digital inequalities.

Older persons are often among those who do not benefit fully from the potential of digitalization, remain offline or do not have home broadband services, due to multifold reasons. This puts older persons at a higher risk of social exclusion, because digital exclusion and social exclusion are intrinsically intertwined. It is a universal responsibility to protect the human rights of every person, including the right to communicate offline or online, and participate in society.

This digital transformation might just be the beginning. Many more digital innovations will come to affect the world and our everyday lives. As more and more information shifts to digital, our citizens will further experience a digital transformation in their jobs and lives.

Therefore, the European Seniors' Union (ESU) has dealt intensively with the topic of digitalization. In a recent statement on 'Older persons and digital inclusion in today's information society (23rd March 2021), the ESU calls on governments and stakeholders to promote and establish the necessary tools for the development of trustworthy digitalized societies and the inclusion of all — this includes fully the older generations in the digital age.

Everyone has the right to age with dignity, to share their experiences and to develop their abilities to participate in all areas of society, including in an ever-changing, digitally transformed world. The ESU and its member Associations are ready to promote and create the necessary facilities in their living environments to enable their fellow citizens to optimize their capacities, in particular their digital media and information skills, to face the digital challenges and to use the opportunities of connectivity in today's society.

In this here-presented Resolution, we highlight the need to enable Media and Information Literacy for everyone. Access to the internet and the requirement of basic Media and Information skills are the first steps to use and understand digital communication in the private and public space, and to counter the recent rise in internet fraud, disinformation, misinformation, hate speech and online harassment.

We start by sketching some recent policy developments touching seniors and digitalization. Afterwards, we highlight our concerns and proposals to include seniors as target groups in the promotion of Media and Information Literacy. Not to forget, of course, that not only states and governments at several levels have a role to play, but also public and private stakeholders and civil society associations, including the ESU.

Context

A people-centred digital Europe

Digitalization has the potential to provide solutions to many of the challenges facing Europe and Europeans. With further impetus from the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU is working to accelerate the technological shift. Safeguarding EU values and the fundamental rights and security of citizens are essential elements of the digital transition.

Digitalization is an essential part of the EU's response to the economic crisis caused by COVID-19. The pandemic has made the need to accelerate the digital switchover in Europe even more urgent.

In line with previous options and plans and in view of the tremendous changes brought by COVID-19, the EU has recently launched several plans, while the European Commission wants, as one of its six overarching priorities, to create a Europe fit for the digital age.

The Digital Compass 2030 translates the EU's digital ambitions for 2030 into concrete terms. The vision builds on the strategy for shaping Europe's digital future, which remains the overarching framework. The European Commission has set out the EU's ambition to pursue digitalization policies that enable individuals and businesses to move towards a people-centric, sustainable and more prosperous digital future, where no one is left behind.[1]
The EU's digital transformation revolves around four main pillars: skills, governments, infrastructure and business. The first target, expressed as a digitally literate population (at least 80% of all adults should have basic digital skills by 2030), is very important and we welcome it, but we miss references to age groups. According to the ESU, people in the post-professional phase of life must be supported in acquiring digital literacy skills just like all other age groups. Also, integrating people over 70 follows the urgent need to include all age groups in an educated population.

Digital literacy in our times must be considered as one of the key cultural techniques like reading and writing, opening a window into the world, offering knowledge and information as well as culture and entertainment according to each citizen's individual interests and demands.

To enhance digital skills and digital competences a Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027) was already announced by EU President Ursula von der Leyen in 2019. The Action Plan, adopted by the College of the Commissioners on 30 September 2020, is a long-term policy initiative to support the sustainable and effective adaptation of the education and training systems of EU Member States to the digital age, offering a strategic vision for high-quality, inclusive and accessible European digital education and addressing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We welcome these EU initiatives, introducing opportunities for an improved quality and quantity of teaching concerning digital technologies. But almost all the political initiatives and actions are related to aspects of economic life, the living environment of men and women during their professional occupation, formal education and training focusing on improving individual competences and employability and optimizing professional and economic life.

Human rights, participation, and well-being of older persons in the era of digitalization

The principle of 'everyone' needing access to digital technology is recognized in recent EU Council conclusions, but often concrete actions for older persons and vulnerable groups are lacking.

Of particular interest and as a foundation for further action in the EU are the Council conclusions on 'Human rights, participation and well-being of older persons in the era of digitalization', adopted on 12th October 2020 under the German Presidency. The conclusions of the Trio Presidency (Germany, Portugal, Slovenia) in December 2020 give a follow-up to these general perspectives. The Trio Presidency calls for (point 10): *"Closing the digital divide between younger and older generations as well as between older women and men, namely by strengthening different forms of education and training, life-long learning*

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[1] See: Europe's digital transformation by 2030

opportunities and the development of skills".[2] In these documents, and in almost all international documents on digitalization, the principle of 'digital inclusion for all' is included. Also in the EU Digital Education Action Plan, the need for digital literacy is sketched out and promoted, but the strategy and action plans are almost totally linked to formal teaching and education, with an important focus on improving individual competences and employability. A concrete analysis of an older person's problems to engage in digital learning and integration in the digital society is missing.

Consequent cooperation among European and national NGOs concerning European Fundamental Rights can achieve strong influence when EU legislation on digitalization affects the older population.

All EU institutions and all Member States must ensure that all citizens benefit from digitalization, are qualified for the digital society, and can exercise their rights both online and offline — which is especially important for older people, just like poorer population groups and people who live in remote, non-digitalized areas. The EU shares these ambitions and political strategies with other international institutions (UNESCO, UNECE, Council of Europe…) in taking responsibility for the protection of human rights, including enhancing digital skills. Recently, the Member States of the Council of Europe (Ministerial Conference on *Artificial Intelligence — Intelligent Politics, Challenges and opportunities for media and democracy* on 10-11 June 2021) committed their engagement for protecting human rights in a new digital society, where people have access, use and understand the new media and digital technologies, think critically, analyse it and make informed choices. They wanted to ensure that, at all times, 'seniors and other vulnerable groups have the knowledge, skills and awareness regarding their safe and informed access to, and exercise of, rights in the digital environment'.

If older persons are not provided with technology access and the necessary training, they will be shut off from society, worsening an already worrying trend of isolation and loneliness among many older citizens.

Securing trust in the digitalization process as well as in functioning democratic control systems can convince people who fear dangers and negative impacts to health or social life. This makes it indispensable that governments and responsible institutions make the relevant benefits and the public utility of digital achievements evident to all citizens. This includes the great progress in telemedicine as well as in Artificial Intelligence and the 'Internet of Things', offering solutions especially for older people and those with care needs, also allowing them to stay in their homes as long as possible.

On the same level of importance, the ESU calls on all senior citizens in Europe to accompany the digital era and to engage in learning, training, and practising the new technologies in order to experience the best possible benefits for their lives. The ESU member organizations can be of great support to motivate and include older people in their home countries.

In addition to that, institutions at national and international level from governments to municipalities, from public to private, from industry to economy are urged to secure paper-based and/or other communication and information modalities for all who need it

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[2]https://www.bmfsfj.de/resource/blob/163906/c2173339af6c7568dbd168b29a31b06e/trio-presidency-declaration-on-ageing-data.pdf

Media & Information: cornerstones in a democratic society

Freedom of expression, online and offline, is one of the basic preconditions for progressing in a democratic and pluralistic society. The media has a cornerstone role as a fundamental source of free information, a platform for debate and deliberation, helping to inform and empower citizens, strengthening transparency and democratic accountability, often also by acting as a public watchdog.

Massive digitalization in recent years has had a substantial impact on the media landscape and the exercise of freedom of expression and other human rights. Search machines and social media platforms have largely taken over the role of traditional media. Major players have created an environment that constitutes fertile ground for the growing phenomena of propaganda and disinformation. A lack of transparency, hate speech and social polarization is creating a media environment of 'information disorder'.

At the same time, threats to fundamental rights, democracy and the rule of law are increasing in the digital age. Large segments of the public are turning to social media as their main source of information, but they are vulnerable to information disorder. The protection of the right to freedom of expression is often under attack. Combating these phenomena of misinformation ('fake news') is not only relevant to the domain of human rights but is also a fundamental factor in terms of the defence of the rule of law and democracy. It is part of the protection of citizens' rights to a diversity of information in order to make informed choices, which are the building blocks of a pluralistic and

democratic society. Freedom of the media, diversity of the media landscape, the independence and safety of journalists, the impact of the growing phenomena of propaganda, hate speech and disinformation is not only related to the role of journalists and producers of news. It concerns all members of society as crucial components of our fundamental rights in Europe.

The right to participate in digital societies

Media and information education should address all members of society equally and all policies to this end must be based on the equal worth of all human beings, without discrimination. It should be part of curricula in schools, continue through the whole working period as part of lifelong learning and be integrated as a goal in public information campaigns and informal learning situations. Governments at all levels, media providers, civil society associations, all stakeholders must feel responsible to provide everyone with the necessary tools to exploit the potential of media and information. Digital learning strategies should be an integral part of a learner-focused, age-appropriate approach to education, with maintenance of personal contact between children, students and teachers, taking into account that older persons need appropriate and targeted policies, without which they will be likely to suffer the most from digital transformation.

Digital skills go beyond the requirements of the labour market. They offer people of all ages opportunities to participate in society and give people a greater say in political decision making (see 'Digital Platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe). They must guarantee the rights and opportunities to personal fulfilment and support personal resilience, critical thinking and innovation potential.

It is of the utmost importance for every person to be able to:

- have access to the internet; a massive expansion of technical infrastructure is an important premise to create the necessary infrastructure to develop and connect with rural areas for decentralized production facilities (broadband); there will be no successful digitalization without broadband coverage over the whole of Europe — in urban and rural areas alike;

- develop technical, cognitive and social skills and competences that enable everyone to understand, critically analyse and evaluate media content;

- develop the ability to protect their privacy in a public sphere;

- make informed decisions based on critical analyses of the content and the media and environment;

- understand the ethical implications of media and new technologies and creating content in the new media environment.

Through appropriate capacity-building initiatives, the EU, governments, and all stakeholders must support the development of media and information competences among older persons. Older persons have the right to participate in all areas of society and develop fully their capacities. They also have the right to live and grow old without ageism or other discriminatory observations. When they need help to exercise this right, in a permanently changing societal context, it is the responsibility of governments to eliminate the obstacles and to support older society members to include them in the permanently changing society. Older persons are ready for it. Moreover, it is not only governments that are responsible for the creation and organization of these initiatives. Also, non-governmental associations have a relevant role to play. The ESU will build a common strategy about the exchange of good practices and how to support voluntary initiatives of lifelong learning towards digital literacy.

Including appropriate goals and initiatives for older persons in digitalization policies

Mastering digital technology has become an essential part of participating fully in society. If we do not provide access to services and training for older people in technology, the risks of social exclusion and loneliness and a sense of insecurity or disorientation will increase. This may even endanger EU member states' economic and political stability. Digital inclusion is a crucial prerequisite for connectivity and for being able to participate and contribute to society. It is up to the national governments in Europe to make this possible for their citizens. It is up to the digital providers and stakeholders to create space for all generations to access and learn, including older people and vulnerable groups as well as the growing number of people with memory diseases.

European politics is strongly recommended to integrate concrete measures for the older population in their upcoming plans, such as equipping senior residences with laptops or tablets (as it is done for schools), installing broadband and Wi-Fi-networks in all relevant institutions where senior citizens live or act.

This must include all areas and regions in Europe — urban and rural ones alike.

The EU is also called on to develop concepts for fostering intergenerational cooperation and solidarity to master the demands of the new digital era together.

The ESU is convinced that for active and competent participation, the inclusion of the older generation is not only a right for every person, but also an asset for society. A democracy cannot be a resilient society if older people are left behind. For example, the generations of 60 plus are the biggest age groups of voters in all elections. And they are also major consumer groups towards the recovery and global competitiveness of the European economy in the future.

Therefore, the ESU calls for and demands that:

- surveys about the use of digital tools and the knowledge about digitalization includes not only age-groups until the age of 70 or 75 years old, but that 'all ages' should be included; and that the exclusion of older persons in surveys must be comprehended as ageism;

- the 'White book on Demographic Change', announced by vice-president D. Šuica, will include specific and massive digital learning opportunities for older persons; the European Commission highlights as never before the importance of main-streaming ageing policies and invites Member States to follow this trend — the ESU, as an active partner in civil society, is also happy to support this;

- appropriate initiatives be presented in the announced Digital Education Action Plan (see 'The Digital Education Action Plan, 2021-2027, priority 2, action 10), oriented to formal education, curricula and the training of teachers in schools and formal learning institutions; the cooperation of regional and local governments, together with voluntary initiatives, can certainly offer a diversity of mutual learning situations;

- the European Commission should encourage and provide facilitation to each Member State for benchmarking the Digital Fitness and needs of its older population, and craft and deploy upskilling / reskilling targeted programs that best fit the individual needs of each country. This will ensure inclusivity and social integration;

- all this should lead as soon as possible to a wide offensive for initiatives at different government levels and in civil society and may also become part of the parameters of the European Semester.

Conclusion

For global initiatives to promote Media and Information literacy, Europe should focus on the annual 'Global Media and Information Week coordinated by UNESCO since 2012. (This year it will be commemorated from 24-31 October 2021). It highlights the importance of Media and Information Literacy as part of media and communication governance and as part of the right to education. The ESU calls on all stakeholders to take initiatives to empower people of all ages and to ensure older persons' rights to participate to a maximum in today's digital societies. Digital literacy is essential for all states and citizens, and indispensable for developing an understanding of the risks and opportunities of digital technology. It is a common responsibility:

No one can be left behind!