



Kansallinen senioriliitto ry

Digital Europe – A threat or an opportunity for the seniors

Context

In the era of digitalisation, our society is evolving at a great pace. Digital innovations and new technologies are both disrupting and facilitating our daily life, which leads to both challenges and opportunities. In that regard, the Commission launched their Digital Agenda for 2020 in order to tackle all those challenges and grasp the opportunities to boost our economy.

One of the major challenges, especially in the light of older adults, is the digital divide in the Union. An early definition on the digital divide only focused on access to technology¹. It, however, seems that a more complex interplay of economic and social elements is characterizing the digital divide. Whereas the access to technology and coverage of broadband is and/or was mainly a problem occurring in rural areas, the set of economic and social elements leading to the digital divide is more widespread.

Therefore, a first and second degree of digital divide was distinguished in the academic literature. The first degree focusses on the accessibility and the penetration rate of technology in a certain area. The second degree highlights the ability to use the technology in an appropriate way and the overall digital skills as an important factor to measure this digital divide. To this extent, the digital divide is largely, but not solely, driven by age². It thus boils down to the dichotomy of those who have both access and skills to benefit from technology and those who don't³.

And those benefits are more widespread than ever (mHealth, eGovernment, online banking, etc.). In other terms, the quality of life increasingly depends on the degree of one's digital skills and connectivity. The figures on the regular use of internet by older adults are growing, but not everyone has yet a sufficient set of digital skills and access to these technologies in order to enjoy the full potential of it.

Older adults, people with disabilities and/or low incomes are the most vulnerable 'disadvantaged' groups when it comes to suffering from a both first as second degree digital divide. It is therefore of the utmost importance to avoid a Matthew effect regarding the

¹ P. Verdegem, "De digitale kloof en/in e-government : uitdagingen voor de overheid in de informatiemaatschappij", UGent, 2009

² S. Czaja, "The impact of ageing on access to technology", Accessibility and Computing, 2007

³ F. Bélanger and L. Carter, "The Effects of the Digital Divide on E-Government: An Emperical Evaluation", 2006

positive effects of digitalisation⁴. As active citizenship requires the ability to participate fully in society, enhanced digital skills and decent access are necessary to do so in a meaningful matter. Bridging the digital divide is not only a matter of technology; it is also an important social investment.

Role of the EU

The EU is aware of the current challenges regarding the digital divide of both degrees. A wide range of actions is therefore established by the Institutions in order to enhance the connectivity, accessibility and ability of its citizens. It has to be, however, concluded that there is no straight-forward answer to those difficulties as some of the required measures are hard to combine in a comprehensive strategy tackling all problems that occur in the light of the digital divide.

Consequently, we find a scattered pattern of competencies which deal with the aforementioned challenges. First and foremost, the Commissioner for Digital Economy and Society (formerly known as the Commissioner for the Digital Agenda), Mariya Gabriel (EPP, BG), is at the driver's seat to propose legislation and other measures. The overarching aim thereby is the completion of the Digital Single Market (DSM). This DSM is based on three pillars: Access, Environment and Economy & Society. Regarding the current challenges for seniors in the era of digitalisation, the first and last pillars are of the most importance to include all those who are vulnerable to the increasing pace of digitalisation. Due to this actual lack of access and digital skills, implications on several segments of everyday life are being distinguished.

In the healthcare sector, multiple applications of new technologies are being used in order to improve the wellbeing of caretakers and dependent persons. With eHealth-systems, care could be provided on a better, tailor-made and people-centred basis if people are able to use those applications in a sufficient manner. There are also, on the other hand, benefits in the use of games, social media and other new technologies to ban loneliness.

On the labour market, one could notice an increased need of digital skills. A growing number of jobs are currently requiring a certain level of those competencies. Whereas people will have to work longer on average, also older adults will have to obtain those skills in order to engage in a satisfactory employment.

Therefore, the EU is engaging in several projects to reduce this digital divide and address the subsequent implications thereof. In its framework of completing the Digital Single Market, digital inclusion is one of the topics. Plenty of funding mechanisms are also tackling this digital divide, besides measures within the DSM, such as CEF, EFSI, ERDF and Horizon 2020.

⁴ A. Van Deursen, "A nuanced understanding of Internet use and non-use amongst older adults", London School of Economics, 2005

Preliminary conclusion

Active ageing is an important area of social investment. One of the elements to guarantee the possibility to actively engage in society is bridging the digital divide. It reduces the risk of being marginalized in everyday life and opens up opportunities on different levels. The EU should therefore remain an active promoter of digital inclusion by funding of and focusing on a broad coverage of basic internet and life-long learning regarding digital skills. In an ever-growing digital society, those elements are indispensable to build an age-friendly Union.

Speakers



Heinz K. Becker is Member of the European Parliament, where he coordinates the social affairs topics for the Austrian EPP delegation. Since 2013 he is vice chair of European Senior Citizens' Union ESU as well as he chairs the "Friends of ESU" group at the European Parliament. He is the only representative of a seniors citizens organization in the European Parliament hence it is his major concern to strengthen the solidarity between generations, fight against age discrimination and work for the best social conditions for all generations. As Vice-Chair of the Intergroup on Active Ageing at the European Parliament he is committed to ensure that the digitalization of society does not prevent any citizen to participate in society and stands strong against poverty in older age. As Vice-Chair of the informal Interest Group for Carers he is highly engaged to increase best possible support for family members who render 70 % of all care work in Europe.

Janne-Olli Järvenpää graduated with a Master of Science from the Helsinki School of Economics. He was the CEO and co-founder of Mediverkko Oy from 2006 to 2015. Currently he is the CEO of Mehiläinen Oy and was recently elected as the chairman of the Finnish Association of Private Care Providers. He built up a great knowledge on the digitalization in the healthcare sector and how this could benefit or affect seniors.





Jyrki Katainen has a Master's degree in Political Science from the University of Tampere and started his career for a short time as a teacher. He was elected in the Finnish parliament for the first time in 1999 and became the leader of the National Coalition Party, Kookomus in 2004. From 2007 to 2011 he was the Deputy Prime Minister in Finland, after which he became the Prime Minister until he was appointed European Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs and the Euro in 2014. Under the Presidency of Jean-Claude Juncker, he currently is the Commissioner for Jobs, Growth, Investment and Competitiveness and the Vice-President of the Commission.

Pia-Noora Kauppi obtained her Master of Laws at Helsinki University and was previously working as legal advisor for the Parliamentary Group of the National Coalition Party, Kokoomus. From 1999 until 2008 she was elected Member of European Parliament for the same party. Afterwards she started a career in financial services where she gained valuable expertise on the digitalization of the financial sector and the subsequent issues older adults have to deal with. She is currently the Managing Director of the Federation of Finnish Financial Services.



Georg Männik holds a MD and PhD on theoretical and practical medical fields (both Moscow, Russia), an MSc on industrial electronics (Tallinn, Estonia), a PhD on public health (Gothenburg, Sweden) and has diploma on classical philosophy and ethics (Tallinn, Estonia). He is a social and health administrator and manager with 34 years of experience in over 15 countries in Europa and Asia. Currently, Georg Männik works in the areas of health strategy, e-health and on public-private partnership issues. He also serves as Chairman of the Supervisory Board of the biggest hospital in Estonia, North Estonian Regional Hospital. As a public task, he is the Chairman of the Audit Committee of the central part of Tallinn City.

Alexander Stubb holds a PhD in International Relations from the London School of Economics and Political Science. He was also elected Member of the European Parliament for the National Coalition Party, Kookomus, for the period 2004-2008. After this mandate, he joined the Finnish government where he was subsequently the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of European Affairs and Foreign Trade and the Prime Minister of Finland. From 2016 onwards, he is the Vice-President of the European Investment Bank. During this Helsinki Congress, he will run against Manfred Weber to be elected the EPP's Spitzenkandidat.



Steven Van Hecke is associate professor of Comparative and EU Politics at the KU Leuven where he conducts research and publishes on European political parties, EU institutions and the history of the European integration process. He is also Chairman of the KU Leuven Wilfried Martens Fund, President of KADOC (Documentation and Research Centre on Religion, Culture and Society) and research associate of the WMCES. He regularly comments EU topics in the Flemish press.

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