

Digitalisation and older people

our call to EU Policy Makers

28 June 2024

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Executive Summary

This paper has been developed by and with AGE members involved in the Task Force "Age-Friendly Environments".

Europe is ageing and is facing a digital revolution. While we recognise and value the positive change new technologies can bring, we are also conscious of, and have experienced, the barriers created by too rapid digitalisation and the impact it has on our autonomy, participation and dignity.

We have identified four priorities we would like the European Union, its Member States and all relevant stakeholders to make progress on:

- Collecting and making available more data on digital technologies in old age, therefore making older people truly visible and to better identify the gaps, the needs for actions as well as the progress.
- Tackling ageism to dismantle stereotypes about older people and digital technologies. The change of lens is critical to make sure that both policies, products and services are shaped to answer people's needs without further increasing inequalities.
- Guaranteeing full accessibility, including availability and affordability, to ensure that the digital transition leaves no one behind.
- Using human rights as a compass for digitalisation so that people come before technologies.

This paper is our contribution to the debate and includes recommendations to achieve a smooth digital transition for everybody. A digital transition that is barrier free and attractive for all; a digital transition where we, older people, are a true partner; a digital transition which aims at building a better Europe.

It also shows that we are playing an active role in this transition and developing projects and activities, especially to support older people in their daily use of digital technologies across the EU (see Annex).

Introduction

In the European Union, the current median age is 43.9 years and is projected to increase to 48.2 years by 2050. People aged 65+ represent 20.6% of the population and are estimated to make up 29.5% of the EU population in 2050. Just as importantly, the group of people aged 85+ is the fastest growing one[1].

In this demographic context, we witness the very rapid digitalisation of our societies in all areas: public services, daily communication, transport, banking sectors, health and care… wherever you go today, whatever you do, you hardly escape the use of digital technologies.

We recognise and value the positive change new technologies can bring: digitalisation makes it easier to stay connected with your loved ones through email, social media, video calls, and messaging apps; it allows us to be part of a lively community, enables online meetings to advance our advocacy work, exchange good practices and develop common initiatives; it enables those of us who face mobility impairments or live in remote/rural areas to perform a number of key daily activities, including receiving medical advice. But we are also conscious of, and have experienced the barriers created by too rapid digitalisation and the impact it has on our autonomy, participation and dignity.

Very recently, the Council of Europe has adopted the first international treaty on artificial intelligence. With the UN Digital Compact to be adopted in September 2024, the United Nations aims at "outlin[ing] shared principles for an open, free and secure digital future for all". The European Union has developed a roadmap towards 2030, Europe's Digital Decade, and intends to be a front runner with the adoption of the Artificial Intelligence Act (May 2024) which aims at "fostering the development and uptake of safe and trustworthy AI systems across the EU's single market".

With this paper we intend to bring our contribution to the debate and to propose recommendations to achieve a smooth digital transition for all. A digital transition that is barrier free and attractive to all; a digital transition where we, older people, are a true partner; a digital transition which aims at building a better Europe.

[1] Eurostat, 2021.

Priority #1: we need to collect and make available more data on digital technologies in old age

The issue of collecting data is not new when it comes to older people. The lack of data about older people and their diversity is reported in most documents by the UN Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older people[2]. It is particularly striking in the area of new technologies: at EU level, obtaining data on the use of new technologies by people age 74+ is almost impossible. This amounts to making older people invisible and gives the impression that this part of the population is not considered as important: this is very much linked to ageism (see priority 2)[3].

Overlooking the situation of people above the age of 74 may also give a wrong message that there is a generational effect that will somehow close the digital gap: basically, because young people are almost born with a smartphone, they should manage more easily with digitalisation when they will grow old. From our perspective, it is a misleading assumption: first it tends to ignore how fast digitalisation is progressing, meaning that we all need to adapt at every stage of our lives and we don't know what will happen in 60 years ~~of~~ time. Second, it ignores the data showing how many people are digitally excluded in all age groups today, as well as the data showing how much the educational, as well as the socio-economic background, plays a role in the digital gap[4].

While nearly 90% of people in the EU use the internet at least once a week, only 54% had basic or above basic digital skills in 2021[5].

(…) nearly one in three older persons in the EU-27 may still face difficulties in the digital sphere due to low educational achievements[6].

The data gap has a strong impact not only on the way we depict older people and their relationships to new technologies but also on a political level. For instance, the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI)[7] used by the European Commission

[2] https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/ie-older-persons, https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/data-gap

[3] AGO, Constellations, « Vieillir dans notre société numérisée » (Jan. 2024)

[4] Fundamental Rights Agency, "Fundamental Rights of Older Persons: Ensuring Access to Public Services in Digital Societies", 2023

[5] Eurostat, 2021 - https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/interactive-publications/digitalisation-2023

[6] Fundamental Rights Agency, "Fundamental Rights of Older Persons: Ensuring Access to Public Services in Digital Societies", 2023

[7] Digital Economy and Society Index - https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/desi

to measure the progress of Europe's Digital Decade, monitors basic digital skills of EU citizens, but only until the age of 74, likewise for eGovernement users[8]. As stated by the Fundamental Rights Agency: "Information and disaggregated data for persons aged 75 and older are missing. This makes it impossible to evaluate and monitor the impact and efficiency of the Digital Decade policy programme and national laws and policies on this group. Nor can their equal access to public services undergoing a digital transition be evaluated/monitored"[9]

This observation is shared by the WHO in relation to Sustainable Development Goals: "Therefore, in order to reach older people – an important, heterogeneous and growing population – and to create visibility in global and national policy and accountability mechanisms, a closer examination is needed of collation mechanisms and types of data collected to measure each Sustainable Development Goal indicator relevant for older persons, including existing levels of disaggregation, analysis and dissemination"[10].

We call on:

- the European Union and its Member States to publish all the data that are collected on digital literacy and on the use and interaction with digital technologies;
- the European Union to give a mandate and the means to Eurostat to have more representative samples covering all age groups, including people above the age of 74; and to collect disaggregated data reflecting the diversity of older people;
- the Member States to use representative samples and collect disaggregated data reflecting the diversity of older people.

[8] Key Performance Indicators to be used to measure the progress towards the digital targets set out in Article 4(1) of Decision (EU) 2022/2481
[9] Fundamental Rights Agency, "Fundamental Rights of Older Persons: Ensuring Access to Public Services in Digital Societies", 2023
[10] World Health Organisation (2024), Making older persons visible in the sustainable development goals' monitoring framework and indicators, License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO

Priority #2: tackle ageism to dismantle stereotypes about older people and digital technologies

"Ageism refers to stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination directed towards others or ourselves on the basis of age" [11]. As reflected in the Global Report on Ageism, this issue affects people throughout their lives and pervades many institutions and sectors in our society[12]. Hence, the development, use and access of digital technologies should also be looked at through the ageism lens. While chronological age is often considered as a barrier to access digital technology, recent research suggests that a possible barrier is ageism: stereotypes associated with old age and new technologies tend to infuse the whole chain: from the conceptualisation and design to the use of digital technologies by older people[13].

> *"Structural ageism is a form of systematic stereotyping and can be defined as the way in which society and its institutions sustain ageist attitudes, actions or language in laws, policies, practices or culture. It can be encountered in the legal system, the media, health care provision and the economy, among many other areas"[14].*

There are concrete consequences of this ageist approach of digital technologies:
- the media representation of older people (including social media and online media),
- the over focus of the market on technologies for care and healthcare[15],
- the way older people experience and adopt successfully (or not) digital technologies[16],
- the limited access to technology-based treatment or assistive technologies to older patients[17],
- the stereotyping design of digital technologies[18],

[11] Global Report on Ageism, WHO, 2021
[12] Global Report on Ageism, WHO, 2021
[13] Euroageism Policy Brief (2021), Ageism and digital technology
[14] AGE Platform Europe (2016), Position on structural ageism
[15] Euroageism Policy Brief (2021), Ageism and digital technology
[16] McDonough, C.C.: The Effect of Ageism on the Digital Divide Among Older Adults. Gerontol. Geriatr. Med. 2, 1–7 (2016). https://doi.org/10.24966/ggm-8662/100008
[17] Ungar A, Cherubini A, Fratiglioni L, de la Fuente-Núñez V, Fried L, Krasovitsky MS, Tinetti M, Officer A, Vellas B, Ferrucci L. Carta of Florence against ageism. No place for ageism in health care. Eur Geriatr Med. 2024 Apr;15(2):285-290. doi: 10.1007/s41999-024-00938-7. PMID: 38418711; PMCID: PMC10997702.
[18] Stypinka J, Roselas A, Svensson J, "Silicon Valley Ageism – ideologies and practices of expulsion in the technology industry" in Technological Ageism, Routledge.

- the bias of artificial intelligence based on stereotyped and/or partial data sets for learning patterns which does not reflect the diversity of older people[19] [20].
The use of automated decision-making based on AI can have huge implications on health insurance when companies calculate the individual risk and adapt costs[21], for the assessment of mortgages or procedures for authorising insurance[22]
- biometric technology (facial-, voice/speech-, fingerprint recognition) is not adapted to age-related physical changes and is not adequately trained to do so[23].

> *"For some older people, digital exclusion was clearly having a significant impact on their health and well-being, with some individuals, sharing that the issues and barriers they face leave them feeling inadequate, that they are not valued by society and that they are being left behind"[24].*

We call on…

- the European Commission to adopt and release an Age Equality Strategy to address ageing as an equality issue and target all ageist barriers to ~~and~~ ensure coherence in the way ageing is addressed across EU policies, including on digital technologies;
- the EU Member States to adopt the Equal Treatment Directive to tackle age-based discrimination across sectors;
- the EU Member States to implement the Artificial Intelligence Act and on the European Commission to monitor the effective application of the AI Act;
- All stakeholders, including the IT industry, academia, designers, developers, to dismantle their stereotyped approach.

[19] Rosales, A. & Fernández-Ardèvol, M. (2019). Structural ageism in big data approaches. *Nordicom Review,* 40 (Special Issue 1): 51-64. doi:10.2478/nor-2019-0013.
[20] Stypinska J and Franke A (2023) AI revolution in healthcare and medicine and the (re)emergence of inequalities and disadvantages for ageing population. *Front. Sociol.* 7:1038854. doi: 10.3389/fsoc.2022.1038854
[21] Stypinska J and Franke A (2023) AI revolution in healthcare and medicine and the (re)emergence of inequalities and disadvantages for ageing population. *Front. Sociol.* 7:1038854. doi: 10.3389/fsoc.2022.1038854
[22] Equinet, report by Robin Allen and Dee Masters, "Meeting the new challenges to equality and non-discrimination from increased digitisation and the use of Artificial Intelligence", 2020.
[23] Stypinska J and Franke A (2023) AI revolution in healthcare and medicine and the (re)emergence of inequalities and disadvantages for ageing population. *Front. Sociol.* 7:1038854. doi: 10.3389/fsoc.2022.1038854
[24] Older People's Commissioner for Wales, Report "Access Denied: Older people's experiences of digital exclusion in Wales" (Jan. 2024).

Priority #3: ensure full accessibility to reduce the digital gap

Accessibility is critical to ensure autonomy and participation which explains why there is a dedicated article on accessibility in the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: it covers both accessibility to infrastructure and facilities as well as accessibility to information, communication and other services for any type of impairments, including cognitive disabilities[25]. Thanks to the ratification of this Convention by the European Union and its Member States, progress has been made to improve accessibility to digital technologies. For instance, the EU has adopted the Web Accessibility Directive in 2016[26] and the European Accessibility Act in 2019[27] but further improvement is needed notably to implement these legal tools across all sectors.

It is also critical to have a comprehensive approach to accessibility by considering other dimensions, in particular availability and affordability.
Availability of internet for example is still an issue in some rural and remote areas (bearing in mind that the proportion of older people in these areas is high), putting users at risk while essential services are increasingly digitalised.
Regarding affordability, lots of users are facing difficulties affording either an internet subscription or recent equipment to use key applications[28]. There is even a double penalty imposed on them: in many cases, they face additional costs for not using digital solutions or may even be fined because invoices or key statements are now sent only electronically.
While the targets for Europe's Digital Decade are very ambitious - they aim for example at 100% online provision of key public services for citizens and 100% access to an electronic identification card (eID) -, they cannot be achieved if full accessibility including availability and affordability are not met.

By demanding full accessibility, the point is not to give back the entire responsibility to users: while accessibility is a pre-requisite, it is not sufficient. The aim is also to make sure we create a digital environment where users can feel confident and ready to engage because it is reliable, understandable, secure[29] and it considers the mental well-being of users.

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[25] Ref. to art. 9 of the UNCRPD
[26] https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/web-accessibility
[27] https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1202
[28] The issue of the constant need for recent equipment to be able to use key applications also raises the issue of environmental sustainability which is not covered by this policy paper.
[29] These dimensions were already listed in our publication: "ICT for Ageing Well: listen to what older people think!" (February 2014)

Likewise, putting the digital literacy of users at the core is a heavy responsibility and burden on users while we should first ensure that designers and developers have adequate curricula so that the accessibility and diversity of users becomes automatically mainstreamed.

"How can we explain that e-bikes have become such a common product over the last 10 to 15 years, popular among all age groups? Well, we did research on this very question, and talked to nearly all Dutch e-bike manufacturers (…). Those people that actually developed e-bikes described a process to us where they did not see the (initially) older e-bikers as a niche market for a "special version" of a regular bike. Instead, they told us that they were interested in these early assistive devices as an inspiration for further innovation and as a starting point for learning.
This is a very important shift in perspective, because older people now don't appear as "laggard" users defined by their incapability to ride a regular bike. Instead, they appear as what we call "early adopters" of an innovative technology – the e-bike – whose use practices can teach important lessons for future directions for that innovation.
(…) Why is this relevant? Well, it is a good example for an ongoing shift among some technology developers and academic researchers, me included, to find new narratives about older people and their relations with technological change and digitalisation (…)."

Extract from the TEDx Talks given by Alexander Peine "How older people actually inspire new tech" (Open Universiteit Heerlen, 12 March 2024 – available here)

We call on:

- the EU Member States and all relevant stakeholders to implement the existing legal instruments, notably the Web Accessibility Directive and the European Accessibility Act, and the related standards;
- the EU and the Member States to support adequately the deployment and sustainability of Accessible EU, the EU resource centre on accessibility;
- the ICT sector (SMEs and industry) to mainstream accessibility across all products;
- the EU Member States to ensure that citizens are not excluded or even financially penalised due to the digitalisation of essential services.

Priority #4: human rights as a compass for digitalisation

As described under priority #3, accessibility of digital technologies is a key right to ensure participation and autonomy to everyone, including persons with disabilities and older people. Beyond accessibility, it is essential to embed digitalisation in the wider human rights framework.

> *"New technologies have driven innovation, economic growth, and sustainability. However, a successful digital transformation must be grounded on a safe, inclusive, sustainable, and human-centric approach—one that upholds democracy and human rights. Digital rights are fundamental for everyone. We must ensure no one is left behind, providing every European the opportunity to develop essential digital skills and actively participate in our online world."*
>
> *Petra de Sutter, Belgian deputy prime and minister of public administration, public enterprises, telecommunication, and postal services (May 2024)* [30]

We read and hear more and more testimonies from our members concerned by the impact of digitalisation on their daily lives: to buy public transport tickets, to access their bank account, to make an appointment with the doctor, to request the social benefits they are entitled to, to access a car park, to enter their tax declaration, etc. These cannot be done in an analogue manner anymore. While these changes may be convenient, they also put at risk dignity, autonomy and participation. Similar opportunities and challenges are clearly detailed in the 2017 report of the UN Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older people on assistive technology and robots[31]. More recently, the Fundamental Rights Agency published a report focusing on access to public services in digital societies[32] which raises the question of the equal access to these services especially for older people.

[30] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/05/21/eu-digital-policy-council-identifies-main-priorities-for-the-next-legislative-cycle/?utm_source=brevo&utm_campaign=AUTOMATED%20-%20Alert%20-%20Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_id=320

[31] Report of the UN Independent Expert on Assistive Technologies and Robots (2017)

[32] Fundamental Rights Agency, "Fundamental Rights of Older Persons: Ensuring Access to Public Services in Digital Societies", 2023

The denial of the right to education and life-long learning penalises older workers and older people who have fewer opportunities to acquire digital literacy skills[33]. This has not only an impact on the employability of older workers but also on the possibility for every older person beyond employment to acquire new skills and knowledge. The European Digital Education Plan shows how much older people are left outside: adult education and non-formal education initiatives, which are more likely to reach older persons, are left out[34]. And yet critical technology education would empower older people to weigh which technologies they want to use or not to use[35].

The right to autonomy is also at stake due to digitalisation: older people who could previously manage their tax declaration or their daily banking operations themselves can suddenly become highly dependent on a third person[36]. This puts an even higher number of older people at risk of financial abuse.

Dignity is also one of the big issues raised by our members in relation to health- and long-term care, including when provided at home, where welfare technologies and robots are considered as a solution to the staff and financial resources shortages. While we recognise that digitalisation can provide interesting supportive solutions, we don't want them to be developed at the expense of human contacts[37].

[33] AGE Barometer, "How to empower older people on the labour market so they can lead sustainable and quality working lives?", 2023.

[34] AGE contribution to the EU consultation on the revision of the Digital Education Action Plan (2020) and AGE contribution to the UN Open Ended Working Group on Ageing on the right to education (2019)

[35] Alexander Peine, Anne Meissner and Anna Wanka, *"Digitalisation and population ageing: social policy dimensions of the digital divide and innovation"* in Leichsenring, K. and Sidorenko, A. (2024). *A Research Agenda for Ageing and Social Policy. C*heltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024

[36] Fundamental Rights Agency, "Fundamental Rights of Older Persons: Ensuring Access to Public Services in Digital Societies", 2023

French Défenseur des droits, Report on discrimination in older age – focus on access to public services and digitalisation (2021)

King Baudouin Foundation (Belgium), Digital Inclusion Barometer (2024): French version, Dutch version

[37] https://www.age-platform.eu/assistive-technologies-and-robots-age-welcomes-the-new-un-independent-experts-report-and-call-for-a-human-rights-approach/

Our research argues that it is critical for both social care and the design, development and deployment of new and emerging technologies to be based on human rights principles in order to ensure that where technologies are used in social care, they advance, rather than threaten human rights[38].

Among the many other challenges we could name, the right to participation and to access essential services such as transport, banking, energy, social benefits, public administration, voting is critical: digitalisation shall not exclude people, including older people, because no alternative solution is planned: counters, mail and phone lines should continue to exist or be re-established to guarantee equality-while 40% of Europe's population still lacks basic digital skills[39].
While we welcome the signature by the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the EU to the European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles, we are also concerned by the digitalisation push we have witnessed in recent initiatives of the European Commission since they completely overlook the need for an alternative offline solution. To give two examples: the revision of the EU Driving License Directive proposed by the European Commission foresees to only have a digital driving license issued by default[40]; the pharmaceutical legislation revision includes a provision that would allow EU Member States to have medicines package leaflets available only in electronic format[41].

We call on the EU and its Member States to:

- implement the Council Conclusions on human rights, participation and well-being of older persons in the era of digitalisation adopted unanimously on 9 October 2020;
- guarantee offline access to essential services and to assess the digital impact of all policies and legislation;
- support the adoption of a UN Convention on the rights of older people: a critical framework to ensure a comprehensive and consistent implementation of all human rights for older people.

[38] University of Essex's ESRC Human Rights, Big Data and Technology Project, "A Digital Cage is Still a Cage - How can new and emerging digital technologies advance, rather than put at risk, the human rights of older people who draw on social care" (2022)
[39] European Commission, 2022. Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2022 (Human Capital)
[40] https://www.age-platform.eu/driving-licence-directive-our-concerns-echoed-by-international-experts/
[41] https://www.beuc.eu/blog/the-downsides-of-moving-to-digital-only-leaflets-for-medicines-with-the-eus-pharma-reform/

Annex – Concrete initiatives developed by AGE members

DaneAge (Denmark) – Considering the rapid development of welfare technologies and demand by municipalities imposed on older people to buy them, DaneAge decided to make a strong stand: they ordered an opinion survey to better understand the position of the population regarding welfare technologies and developed a one page Charter making clear what should be the citizens' rights in relation to welfare technologies: "Welfare technology can be great when it makes people's lives better. The problem arises when this is not the case. That's when we need to start from the individual's needs and conditions. Welfare technology must never replace human presence, warmth, security and care," says Bjarne Hastrup, DaneAge CEO.

BAGSO (Germany) - The "AI for ageing well" project provides older people and their organisations with skills in the field of artificial intelligence. It aims to help older people become actively involved in current discussions about ChatGPT, pattern recognition and self-learning algorithms and to ensure that they are better recognised and taken into account in the research and development of AI systems. For more information (in German): https://ki-und-alter.de/.

In 2019, BAGSO published a guide for people who want to get started on the Internet and at those who are already users and now want to delve deeper into the digital world. The publication provides answers to questions such as: how can I book, order, shop? But also: How can I navigate the internet safely and protect my data? It provides an overview of the possibilities of the Internet and many useful tips in an understandable and concise form. The guide is available (in German) at: https://www.bagso.de/publikationen/ratgeber/wegweiser-durch-die-digitale-welt/

50+Hellas (Greece) and Anziani e non solo (Italy) – the EU Project FAITH (Feeling Safe to transact online in the third age). aimed at fostering digital inclusion of older adults 55+ with low ICT skills by increasing their capacity and confidence in using online transactions. The FAITh partnership delivered an innovative Peer-to-Peer mentoring programme that built on the principles of motivation and peer support, while engaging the family/ care environment and building partnerships with the local community service network & the local market. For more information: https://www.age-platform.eu/project/faith/

OKRA (Belgium) - The number of Automated Teller Machines (ATMs) in Belgium has declined sharply over the past five years. By the end of 2024, there would be fewer than 4 000 ATMs available. To protest against this, organisation Financité, OKRA and Test-Aankoop have launched the petition SOS Cash. "Because access to your own money is a fundamental right". For more information (in Dutch]: https://www.vlaamse-ouderenraad.be/actualiteit/levenslang-leren-digitale-inclusie/petitie-sos-cash-pleit-voor-meer-geldautomaten

Old Up (France) - Since 2012, OLD'UP has been developing digital training initiatives for older people. This training in the use of a digital tablet is partly to prevent isolation. In 2020, OLD'UP designed an educational guide for carers, relatives and professionals, supplemented by 21 fact sheets explaining, step by step, how to use digital tools and in particular the tablet. Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 epidemic, OLD'UP has distributed 10,000 packs of 4 fact sheets on how to use the tablet, together with a presentation flyer, to nursing homes and other medical establishments. For more information (in French): https://www.oldup.fr/atelier/actions-de-terrain/783



Confederation of Swedish Speaking Retired in Finland (SPF)
Since 2012 SPF has employed an IT-expert and an assistant. Their task is to give guidance concerning the use of computers and other digital tools to members of the local member-associations of SPF. It is put into practice above all by giving guidance to voluntary members who are willing to guide further, as well as giving guidance directly to individual seniors. Courses, "drop-in"-events for interested members, as well as home-visits are arranged.
In 2023, it was reported:
* 43 of the member associations have organized IT-activities
* 1148 individual guidances
* 215 courses with 1983 participants
* 154 lectures with 1228 participants
Tablet computers have been offered to less wealthy members.

About AGE Platform Europe

AGE Platform Europe is the largest European network of non-profit organizations of and for older people. We elevate older people's voice, bringing their experience and aspirations to the table to celebrate ageing and fight for equality at all ages.

Contact

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Transparency Register ID: 16549972091-86