

Media literacy, digital exclusion and older people



The European Older People's Platform
La Plate-forme européenne des Personnes âgées



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Drafted by Isabel Borges, AGE Policy Officer and David Sinclair in collaboration with AGE Universal access and Independent Living Expert Group in particular Heidrun Mollenkopf, Peter Rayner, Rodd Bond and Anne-Sophie Parent, AGE Director.

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I - Introduction

Technology is transforming the way we work, live, and entertain ourselves. In 2000, the former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, noted that *“Half the world’s population has never made or received a phone call”* but by 2007 more than half the world have mobile phones. It took 75 years for telephones to be used by 50 million customers, but it took only four years for the Internet to reach that many users. Plus over the last three years, social networking websites have exploded in popularity with, for example, Facebook attracting 35 million users in the 3 years since its launch.

“I’ve got a mate whose son is in Australia and they talk every weekend via computer links, face-to-face. They think it’s great. And the kids. The kids get on as well”

“But hasn’t modern technology made life easier and much more interesting? I can talk to my grandchildren and see them while I’m talking. It’s wonderful. They can send me emails and they love using it, of course, to it helps them stay in touch. They probably wouldn’t sit down and write me a letter. They wouldn’t, but they can use a computer and send emails, which is lovely.”

“And so I thought it was ever so nice because they were talking to their son and he said, ‘hang on a minute’, and he went and got a piece of toast. I was astounded to think I was looking at somebody in New Zealand at that moment, and he was back with his family. You could see.”¹

In short, we live in a world of communications technology, a world where our work, quality of life, health, and environment are all being transformed by technology.

Of course the changing world being delivered by new technology offers significant opportunities for tackling the problems faced by older people. From home delivery for housebound older people through to potential improvements in transport information systems and to the easier delivery of single access points for services for older people.

The delivery mechanism for these changes need not be exclusively the internet. Around 50% of the older population rely on television as their main form of company and it clearly plays an important role in the lives of many older people.

¹Forthcoming research to be published by Help the Aged on Future Communities.

Digital television can already deliver a wide range of services for older people from the opportunity to book General Practitioners or to renew prescriptions through to crime prevention initiatives or interactive book clubs.

But, at the moment, older people are not in the main making the most of the potential of new technology. A survey by Help the Aged in the UK revealed that more than 3 million older people (36 per cent) feel out of touch with the fast pace of modern life. At the same time as the UK Office of National Statistics shows that seven in ten over 65s have never used the internet.

As one older person said in some recent research :

“when you see something in a book and you think, “ooh, that’s nice,” and then it says if you want more information go to the website, and you think, “well, how am I going to do that? I don’t have a computer!”

Even National Governments have begun to recognise the challenges :

“Excluded groups will increasingly get a worse deal from E-Government”, argued the UK office of Deputy Prime Minister Social Exclusion Unit in November 2005. Their research showed that 77% of respondents to their survey revealed that ICT is likely to increase inequality.² This means that the internet can disadvantage older people who are not online. The lack of web access means that older people are losing opportunities to shop around and get the best deals. It is also excluding them from the labour market as most of employers frequently use the internet to advertise their job vacancies.

² *Inclusion through Innovation: Tackling Social Exclusion Through New Technologies. Social Exclusion Unit, November 2005.*

II - Advantages of Media Literacy for Older People

New technologies can play a major part in helping older people engage with society and better access public and private services. There are a number of significant potential benefits for older people:

- Products and services are often cheaper and more conveniently available online,
- There is now a wide range of information of value to older people available online,
- E-health has the potential to increase the speed of access to health, increase patient satisfaction, provide a more appropriate point of delivery, reduce waiting times, improve the use of resources, help provide equality of availability and reduce medical errors,
- E-democracy and EGovernment have the potential of making both central and local Governments more accessible to the public,
- The internet can help older people gain new skills through the provision of online training and give access to new job opportunities through the countless different recruitment websites,
- The internet and email can provide an extremely useful tool for older people to network with each other,
- Email and instant messaging can be a powerful tool for keeping in touch with friends and family, particularly those overseas.



III - Levels of Media literacy across the European Union

There is a real scarcity of comparable data on digital literacy across the European Union. In some individual member states, such as the UK,³ Ireland and Germany there is some detailed data, but in others there is very little. This situation is not helped by organisations such as Eurostat which publishes data on ICT use up to the age of 74, which with today's demographic trend means that a significant percentage of the population is missing from the picture.

The tables below highlight how, across Europe, internet usage falls with age. The first table shows the picture across Europe, the second highlights the situation in Germany, third highlights the situation in Great Britain and finally the situation in Ireland.

a) The situation across Europe

Table 1 - Individuals who used the Internet at least once a week – by age and gender, EU 27 (%)

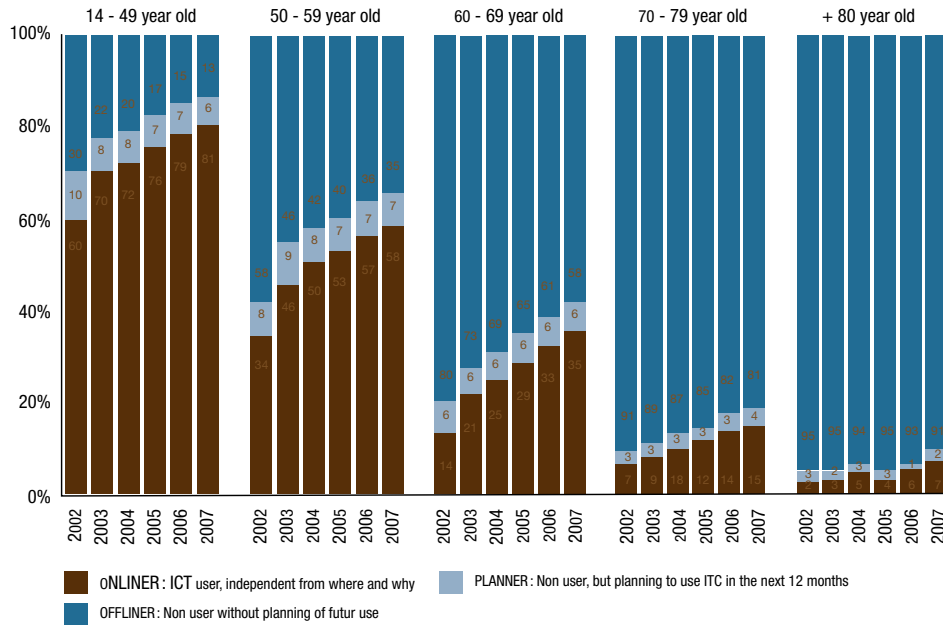
	MALES			FEMALES		
	16 - 24	25 - 54	55 - 74	16 - 24	25 - 54	55 - 74
EU 27	79	61	31	77	55	19
BE	89	74	41	87	69	26
BG	55	32	7	61	33	5
CZ	73	49	21	74	44	11
DK	94	87	58	96	84	47
DE	90	78	44	87	69	26
EE	89	64	19	92	71	22
IE	71	59	24	61	54	17
EL	60	39	7	53	27	2
ES	77	54	17	77	46	9
FR	84	67	34	84	63	23
IT	61	45	17	57	34	6
CY	58	41	14	57	37	6
LV	90	57	15	93	58	14
LT	87	45	10	86	51	9
LU	92	86	60	88	71	29
HU	81	54	21	79	57	16
MT	-	-	-	-	-	-
NL	95	92	64	98	87	46
AT	79	76	41	80	63	24
PL	77	41	12	77	40	8
PT	77	41	13	77	33	6
RO	50	23	4	48	21	2
SI	83	56	16	82	58	9
SK	86	56	14	73	59	10
FI	98	86	48	98	87	40
SE	95	84	61	86	82	49
UK	83	76	50	83	68	33
IS	99	91	70	99	90	60
NO	95	90	61	88	86	54

Source: Eurostat statistics (Note: EU 27 without MT)

³The Latest figures from the UK's National Statistics note that 71% of older people have never used the internet. Ofcom, the UK's communications regulator, collates a vast amount of information about internet access.

b) The situation in Germany

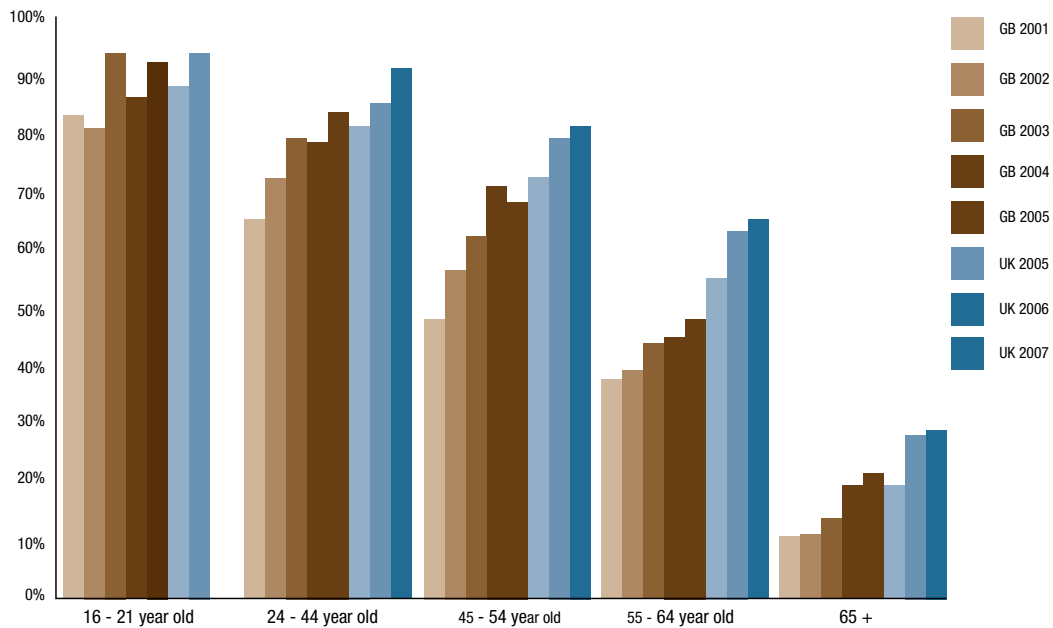
Table 2 - Development of ICT use in Germany by age, 2000-2007



Source: www.digitale-chancen.de

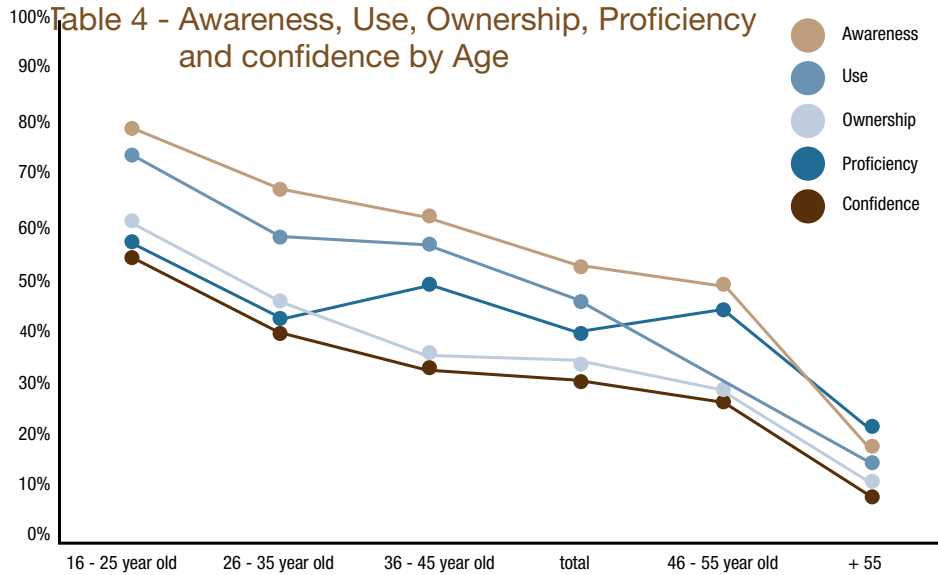
c) The situation in the UK

Table 3 - Ever used the Internet GB 2001-2005/ UK 2006-2008



Source: UK's National Statistics

d) The situation in Ireland

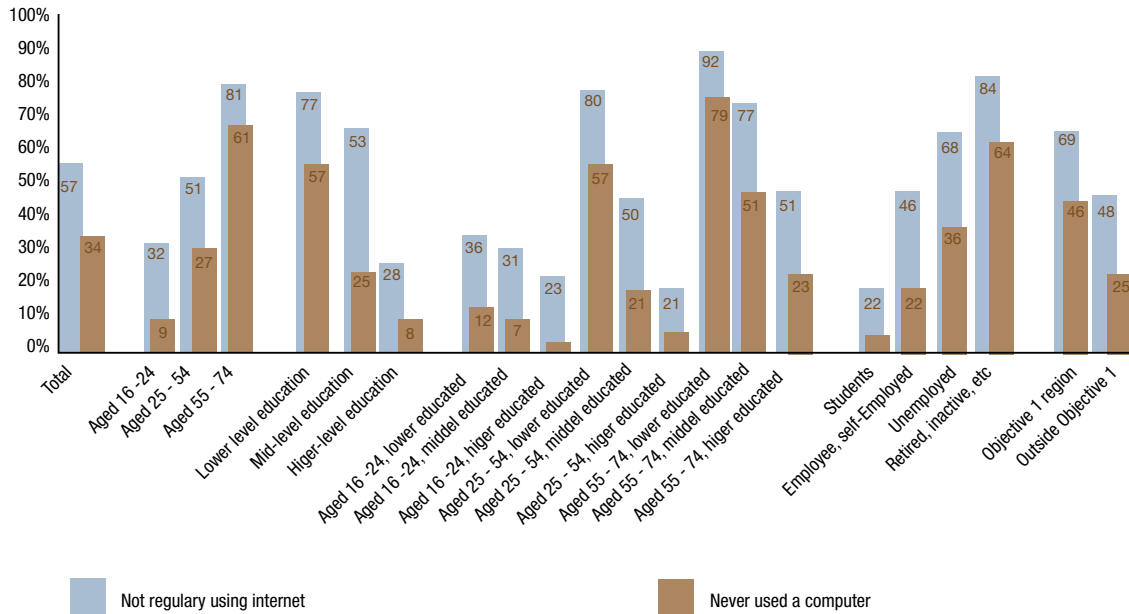


Source: Digital Divide Analysis of the Uptake of Information Technology in the Dublin Region (Haase & Pratschke 2003)

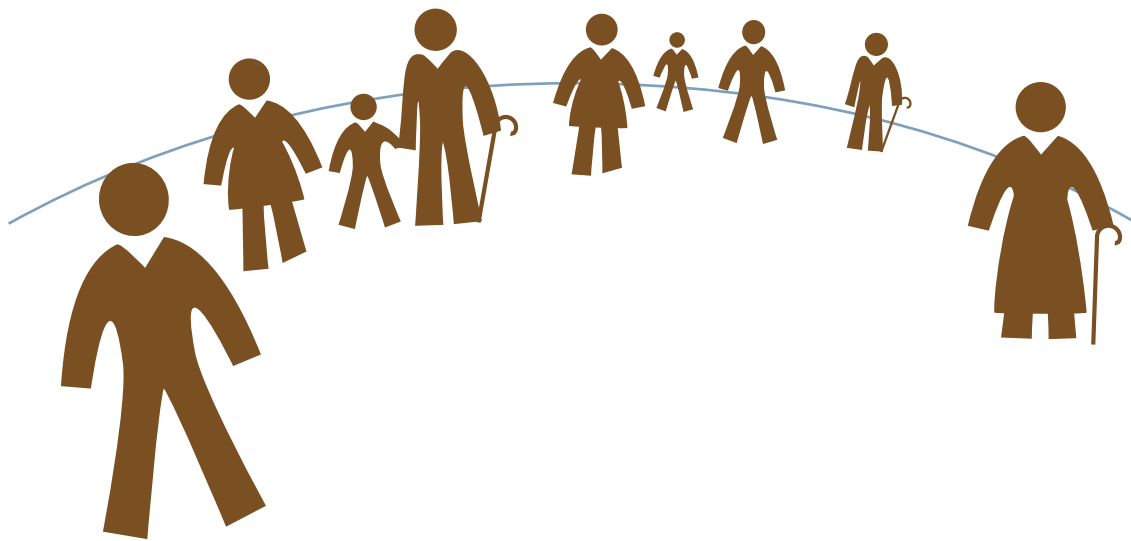
Looking across the age cohorts, in relation to the over 55's in Ireland, children under 16 are four times more likely to be computer aware, six times more likely to use a computer, seven times more proficient and six times more likely to feel confident in relation to computers. The levels of computer availability across the cohorts masks considerable within-household variation in use, proficiency and confidence. The conclusions of this report indicated that the digital divide is inseparable from broader forms of social inequalities, and that interventions which seek to provide access to and/or training in the use of ICTs are likely to be of limited impact unless they are embedded within a broader strategy for combating social exclusion.

Across Europe, older people are arguably the most excluded group of citizens in terms of media literacy. The table below highlights how older people from lower social classes are likely to be the most excluded of all. Statistics from other countries also highlight how older women, and/or older people belonging to an ethnic minority are also amongst the most digitally excluded.

Table 5 - Individuals using computers or the Internet (2005), EU

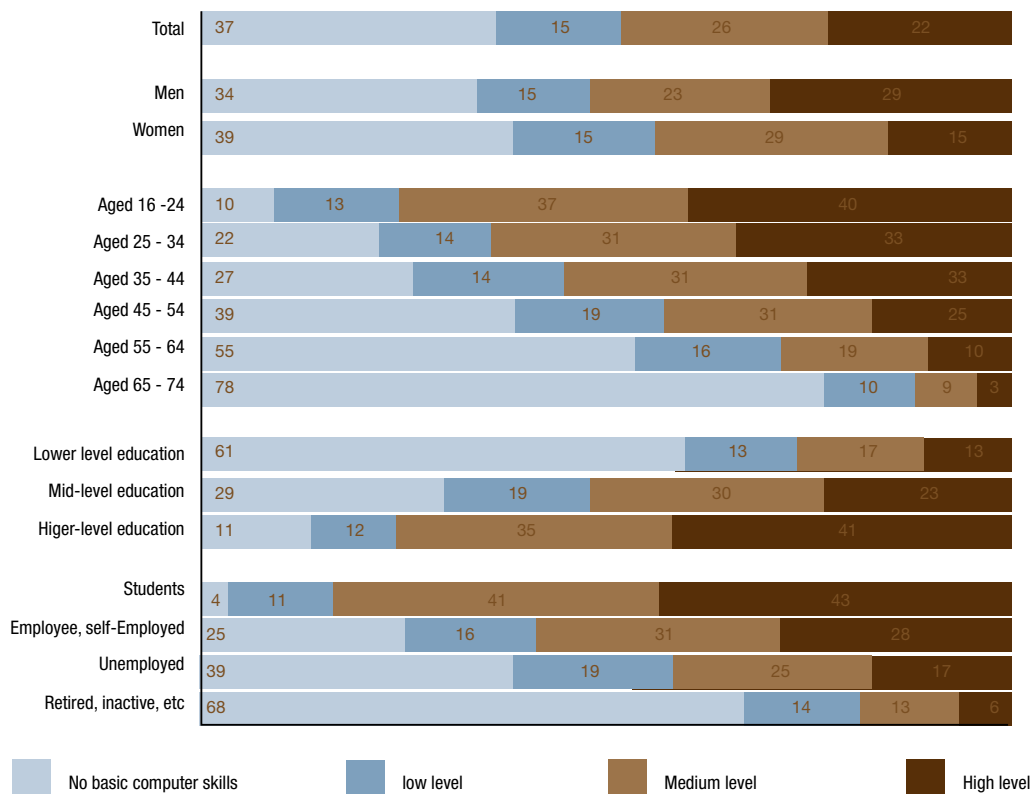


Source: Eurostat, Community survey on ICT usage in households and by individuals



Given the evidence that ICT use declines with age, it is interesting to consider the reasons why. One of the key issues is the level of media literacy or basic computer skills. The table below highlights the key fact that older people are much less likely to have basic computer skills than other ages. If we are to breach the digital divide therefore, it is vital that this skills gap is closed.

Table 6 – Individuals’ level of basic computer skills (2005), EU 25
(as percentage of the total numbers of individuals aged 16 to 74)

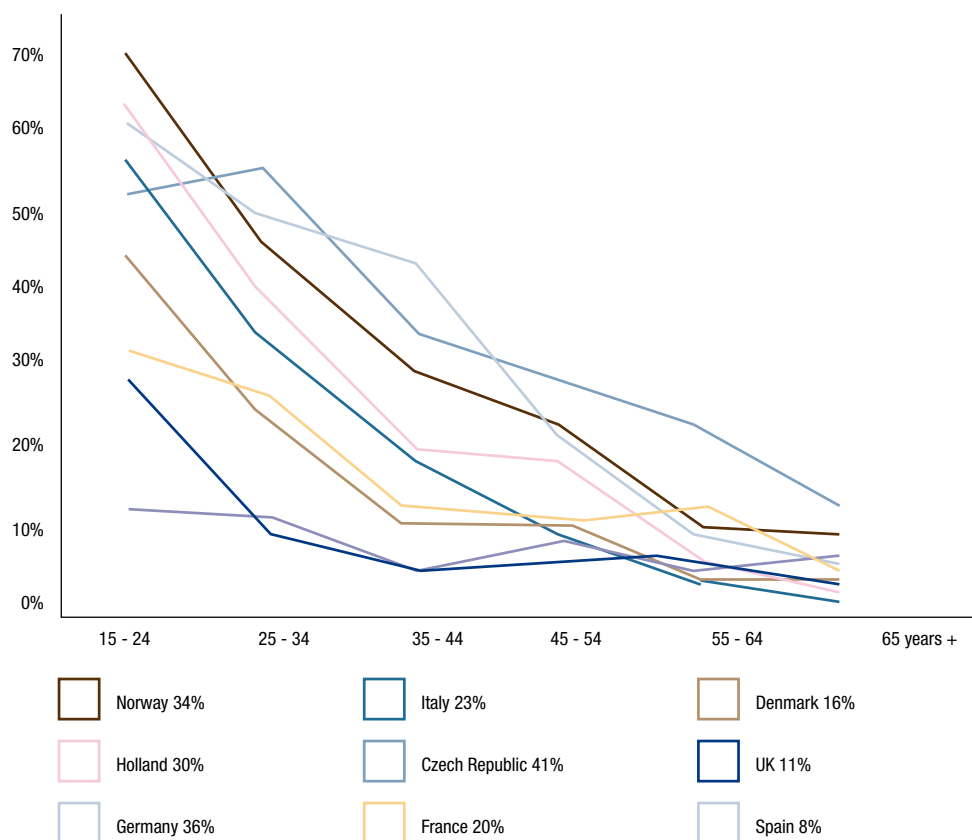


Source: Eurostat, Community survey on ICT usage in households and by individuals

e) Other new technologies

It isn't just the internet and ICT where older people are lagging behind the rest of the population. Ownership and usage of Digital Televisions, mobile phones and other new technologies, decline with age. The figure below highlights for example, how usage of SMS messaging declines with age across a number of European countries.

Table 7 - Proportion of SMS users by age and country
2000 - 2001



Source: www.eurescom.de

f) Changes over time

It is often assumed that the cohort effect alone will solve the digital divide. However figures from Eurostat in 2005 highlight that across Europe, by 2015, internet users will still be outnumbered by non-users in all the age groups above 45 and it will take 30 years before internet users become the majority of Europeans aged 55 to 64.4

⁴ Analysis conducted by empirica and wrc for the European Commission in "LOT 7 – The Demographic Change – Impacts of New Technologies Society" August 2005

IV - Barriers to Digital Inclusion

a) Not interested:

Older people are less likely than younger people to go online and there is a real risk that as a result, they will be excluded from the benefits of the internet. According to research carried out in 2006 in Ireland the percentage of individuals 55-74 who have never used a computer was of 28.5 per cent and those who have never used the Internet amounted to 20.9 per cent⁵. UK statistics have also shown that the vast majority of non users (60% in July 2003) argue that they *“haven't really considered using the internet before and are not likely to do so in the future”*⁶. However neither Government nor the providers of services have done enough to sell the benefits to older people.

b) Buying and using a computer/ Opportunities to Learn:

The fear of viruses, spam, or intrusion can act as a barrier to learn. The language used by providers of computers and other information technology suppliers can often be full of jargon and difficult for any lay person to understand. For those who may have never worked with or used a computer before the problems will be bigger. The rapid pace of information technology can also cause problems and what one learns today maybe outdated tomorrow.

Whilst many voluntary sector organisations, alongside some Government departments and some companies, fund courses for older people to learn how to use the internet or other new technologies. The funding is often short term and lacks sustainability. There is also a *“postcode lottery”* of provision with many areas offering little in the way of learning opportunities to help older people engage with new technology.

“There are certain things I don't know how to do on my laptop, which is quite new to me. I'm having fun doing it but it would be quite nice if there was somebody I could talk to about it. They used to do it for older people. They used to come out and they used a lounge in our sheltered housing complex in the village. They've stopped doing it apparently because they've run out of money.”

“I've taken a couple of courses with the council, courses on computers and things like that which are very good...I've got a grandson, seven years, and he's taking computer lessons. He sends me emails. That's my hobby, the Internet⁷.”

⁵ Central Statistics Office, Ireland. 2006

⁶ National statistics online, July 2003, Internet Access

⁷ Forthcoming research to be published by Help the Aged on Future Communities.

The process of purchasing a computer can be confusing and there is little or no independent advice available for older people. Whilst many people can buy a computer on credit (often interest free), older people often do not have access to such credit either because they have no credit history, or because companies will not provide credit to people over 70 or 75.

c) Cost:

Cost can be a barrier to access to digital technology but the situation is likely to vary by country and the cost of ICT and internet access has fallen in recent years. In the UK for example, National Statistics reveal that between Oct 2000 and July 2003, an average of just 9% of people blame the cost as a reason for not using the internet. In fact, research by Claritas UK revealed that half of those aged 60-64 actually own a computer as do 44% of those aged 65-69⁸.

d) Usability and Accessibility:

Media literacy cannot be seen in isolation from the issues of usability and accessibility. With more useable and accessible products, the challenge of media literacy would almost certainly be a smaller challenge.

The Typewriter was invented in 1829 by William Burt and its layout has barely changed, despite the fact that it is ergonomically inappropriate for modern technology.

Although you can now buy better-designed computers, keyboards and other hardware, it is certainly the case that some people struggle to use mainstream equipment.

Despite positive efforts over recent years, the design and layout of most websites remain inaccessible to some older people. Recent research by the Disability Rights Commission and City University has revealed that less than one in five websites (of a sample of 1000) conformed with even the lowest priority checkpoints for accessibility. At the same time, research for the UK Cabinet Office as part of their e-accessibility project, has highlighted that only 3% of European public websites meet the WC3 web content accessibility guidelines. 70% completely fail; 17% partially fail and only 10% limited pass. This is despite the fact that inaccessible websites potentially breach the UK Disability Discrimination Act.

Sadly for most consumers there isn't much choice in terms of accessibility and usability. Older people's experience of going into high street stores and attempting to find the most useable and accessible equipment is often met with resounding silence. At the same time the market is delivering products which are competing on price and not on usability and accessibility.

⁸ Quoted in the Guardian, 13th December 2003. "Why over-60s are happy to become mouse bound" Jobs and Money section, p14.

V - International commitments

- *Madrid International Action Plan on Ageing 2002*

The Political Declaration made in Madrid at the Second World Assembly on Ageing in 2002 under the auspices of the United Nations committed 160 countries worldwide (including the 27 European Union member states) to promote a “society for all ages”. To achieve these political commitments governments adopted the Madrid International Plan of Action of Ageing, which involves the consideration of ageing into social and economic development where the role of technology is key. Some extracts of these commitments showing the role of technology in older peoples lives are exhibited and highlighted below.

POLITICAL DECLARATION

Madrid, 8-12 April 2002 United Nations

ARTICLE 6

The modern world has unprecedented wealth **and technological capacity and has presented extraordinary opportunities: to empower men and women to reach old age in better health and with more fully realized well-being; to seek the full inclusion and participation of older persons in societies; to enable older persons to contribute more effectively to their communities and to the development of their societies; and to steadily improve care and support for older persons as they need it.**

We recognize that concerted action is required to transform the opportunities and the quality of life of men and women as they age and to ensure the sustainability of their support systems, thus building the foundation for a **society for all ages**. When ageing is embraced as an achievement, the reliance on human skills, experiences and resources of the higher age groups is naturally recognized as an asset in the growth of mature, fully integrated, humane societies.

MADRID INTERNATIONAL PLAN OF ACTION OF AGEING

Madrid, 8-12 April 2002 United Nations

II. Recommendations for action

A. Priority direction I: Older persons and development

(...) lack of access to **technology** that promotes independence and other socio-economic changes can marginalize older persons from the mainstream of development, taking away their purposeful economic and social roles and weakening their traditional sources of support.

28. **Objective 1: Employment opportunities for all older persons who want to work.**

- c) Take action to increase participation in the labour market of the working age population and to reduce the risk of exclusion or dependency in later life. This action is to be promoted through the implementation of policies such as: increasing older women's participation; sustainable work-related health-care services with emphasis on prevention, promotion of occupational health and safety so as to maintain work ability; **access to technology**, life-long learning, continuing education, on-the-job training, vocational rehabilitation and flexible retirement arrangements; and efforts to reintegrate the unemployed and persons with disabilities into the labour market;
38. Older persons facing technological change without education or training can experience alienation. Increased access to education at a younger age will benefit persons as they grow older, including in coping with technological change. Despite such access, however, illiteracy continues to remain high in many areas of the world.

Technology can be used to bring persons together and thereby contribute to the reduction of marginalization, loneliness and segregation between the ages. Measures that enable older persons to have access to, take part in and adjust to technological changes should therefore be taken.

40. Objective 1: Equality of opportunity throughout life with respect to continuing education, training and retraining as well as vocational guidance and placement services
- (f) **Encourage the design of computer technology and print and audio materials that take into account the changes in the physical abilities and the visual capacity of older persons;**

B. Priority direction II: Advancing health and well-being into old age

61. The growing need for care and treatment of an ageing population requires adequate policies. The absence of such policies can cause major cost increases. Policies that promote lifelong health, including health promotion and disease prevention, **assistive technology**, rehabilitative care, when indicated, mental health services, promotion of healthy lifestyles and supportive environments, can reduce disability levels associated with old age and effect budgetary savings.

Issue 2: Universal and equal access to health-care services

70. Primary health care is essential health care based on practical, scientifically sound and **socially acceptable methods and technology made universally accessible to individuals and families in the community through their full participation, and at a cost that the community and country can afford to maintain at every stage of their development, in the spirit of self-reliance and self-determination**. Older persons can experience financial, physical, psychological and legal barriers to health-care services. They may also encounter age discrimination and age-related disability discrimination in the provision of services because their treatment may be perceived to have less value than the treatment of younger persons.

74. **Objective 1: Elimination of social and economic inequalities based on age, gender or any other ground, including linguistic barriers, to ensure that older persons have universal and equal access to health care.**

(g) Utilize **technology** such as telemedicine, where available, and distance learning to reduce geographical and logistical limitations in access to health care in rural areas.

99. **Objective 2: Improvement in housing and environmental design to promote independent living by taking into account the needs of older persons in particular those with disabilities.**

(b) Promote employment of **technology and rehabilitation services designed to support independent living.**

• *Riga Declaration 2006*

On 11 June 2006, Meeting in Riga on the occasion of the Ministerial Conference “ICT for an inclusive society” of the Austrian Presidency of the European Council and of the European Commission and hosted by the government of Latvia, Ministers of European Union (EU) Member States, responsible for eInclusion policy, agreed on a number of actions named “Riga Declaration⁹” to bridge the technological divide of groups often neglected, such as older people. They acknowledged that in 2005 only 10% of people over 65 used Internet. Several actions were mentioned as a way to achieve the agreed political objectives namely:

- Reducing Internet usage disparities
- Increasing broadband coverage - there is still a challenge in rural areas (reach 90% of the EU population by 2010)
- Enhancing Accessibility of public web-sites
- Increasing Digital literacy – low education, economically inactive as well as older population

Riga Declaration 2006 established specific targets in relation to ICT and Ageing

- Halving the gap in average internet use between older people and the EU population
- Removing barriers to the internal market of ICT services and products for older people
- Supporting active ageing at work, through greater training for ICT skills,
- Supporting active participation of older people in society
- Supporting independent living and quality of life of older people

Despite of these international political declarations older people continue, as demonstrated in the previous sections, far from being actively involved and fully benefiting of the advantages of information society. Of course, personal choice of involvement (“*right to opt in*”) in information society is a key issue but one can conclude that the numerous barriers that older people face act as a blockage discouraging them to access adequate technology services and products and ultimately marginalising them from the Information Society. It is worth noting a report by Dr Albert Jordan (Information Society Policy Unit, Dept of the Taoiseach Oct 2007) called ‘*Seniors and Surfing – Why Not?*’ which notes that 9 out of 10 seniors in Ireland are NOT internet users, or have lapsed – not using it for over a year. While cost and technical aspects were considerations, the key challenges identified were ‘*relevance awareness to create the motivation to engage*’ and ‘*availability of appropriate help and training in the right form and at the right pace*’. This situation can be easily be applied not only in Ireland but in the rest of the European Union and certainly expressed by AGE members.

⁹ http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/events/ict_riga_2006/doc/declaration_riga.pdf

VI - Recommendations at National and EU level

AGE – the European Older Peoples Platform believes that:

- A comprehensive EU legislation on eAccessibility and usability of communications technology is urgently needed to ensure that older people have equal access and are not forgotten from the information society
- The European Union must closely monitor the progress of Member states and industry in terms of their commitment to the Riga obligations and ensure that member states exchange best practice examples
- Member states must take measures to increase the levels of media literacy across the EU ensuring that it develops sustainable actions at local and regional level.
- Further community-wide studies should validate and test statistical models examining if the neighbourhood of the residence has an independent and additional effect on social exclusion. If this is the case – the community could support policy initiatives targeted at the most disadvantaged communities. The EU should ensure that technology can be used as an enabling tool to tackle social exclusion and poverty among older people
- Informal networks of friends and acquaintances have a strong impact on the uptake of ICTs. Every computer literate older individual in disadvantaged areas constitutes an invaluable resource to the local community. The EU should examine how it can directly impact on these ‘train the trainer’ initiatives that could both accelerate literacy propagation, and strengthen direct links between the EU and individual citizens.
- Better statistics are needed on the levels of media literacy across Europe. The European Union must also ensure the development of accurate statistics in accordance with the current demographic change.
- Government Ministers must break down the silo structures of Government and look now at the potential, as using digital switchover to deliver new, better, more accessible information services to older people
- While physical access is a pre-requisite, European initiatives should promote interventions to reduce differentials in the way computers are used (proficiency and confidence). The EU should invest in a major (and non ageist) public campaigns to highlight the benefits of getting online
- The EU should issue a major campaign to highlight the business benefits of accessibility for all. Initiatives should be multi-channel and multi-media and strongly embrace mobile access via PDAs and mobile phone

About AGE

AGE the European Older People's Platform is a European network of organisations of older people aged 50 plus and brings together 145 organisations from across the European Union. AGE represents over 22 million people in Europe through its Member organisations and seeks to voice and promote the interests of 157 million inhabitants aged over 50 years and to raise awareness of the issues that concern them the most.

AGE - the European Older People's Platform
Rue Froissart 11 - B-1040 Bruxelles
Tel+32 2 280 14 70 Fax +32 280 15 22
info@age-platform.org

www.age-platform.org

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