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Digital democracy – No apps no say?

How do we ensure that everyone can participate in a digital democracy?

IED & Jan Nagel Foundation organised the conference *Digital democracy – No apps no say?* It comes in the context when all the EU countries are increasingly dealing with an aging society, the negative sentiments towards senior citizens are gaining momentum. The COVID-19 crisis has made us live in a more digitalised society than before, which led to the emergence of a 'new normal', although for our own safety. The lives of senior citizens are influenced by an incremental digitization. Information, handling and keeping up with the multiple changes is a challenge. When people lack user skills, and are digital and media illiterate, they stand at the back of the line in getting jobs, finding a suitable and affordable home, and often get into financial problems, among other things. They need to learn, create, participate and be safe online.

Having basic digital skills is essential in our knowledge society. For that purpose a series of questions need to be answered.

- What to do when you are unable to participate in social and political life because of the lack of digital skills?

- Will segregation in society grow because of factors such as: lack of digital skills, inter-generational differences, accessibility to hardware and internet connection, poverty, people with learning difficulties?

- What are the effects of these developments for democracy?

The speakers of the debate included: **Francesco Rutelli** (IED President), **Dr. Caroline van Dullemen** (PhD - Politics of ageing) University of Amsterdam, **Dr. Jolanda Lindenberg** (PhD - Social Cultural Anthropologist) Leyden Academy, **Ittay Mannheim** (PhD Candidate in the Euro Ageism Innovative Training Network), Eindhoven, The Netherlands, **Tobias Gotthardt**, Member of the Bavarian Parliament, FREIE WÄHLER (Independent Voters), Chair of the Committee on Federal and European Affairs and Interregional Relations, Vice-chairman Commission for education. The moderator was **Gerrit Jan Van Otterloo**, Chairman of the Jan Nagel Foundation.

In his welcoming remark, **Mr. Francesco Rutelli** (IED President) underlined that we tend to believe that digitalization is generally easy and beneficial for everyone, which is usually true for the younger generations. For the older and the less skilled people, digitalization may represent a danger for democracy (e.g. the use of deep-fake). There is a need to understand the extent to which the elderly people can be excluded and the price they pay as a result in the context of the digital transformation. The importance of digitalization for the senior citizens and for citizens with difficult access to technology has been neglected.

Mr. Gerrit Jan Van Otterloo mentioned in his opening remarks that in the Netherlands, during the last elections, 3,5 seats from a total of 150 were lost because the postal voting procedures were not followed after the polls were closed. The older people mostly used this system to cast their vote.

Dr. Caroline van Dullemen, University of Amsterdam, emphasized that the use of technology in the public administration, as well as in the public lives has been sped up during the pandemic, leading to the increased activity of the e-government. This development needs to be discussed within the broader topic of digital inclusion.

E-democracy refers to how the internet can increase opportunities for individuals to interact with the government, and for the government to seek input from the community. The important question is how we can connect all the citizens to this process and to avoid leaving behind the vulnerable ones. This issue is not related only to broadband access, being encountered in technologically advanced countries as well. At the same time, this is not a cohort-problem; the current group with limited internet use has a long tail end. People in their 50s and 60s, who can expect to live for another 20 or 30 years with limited use of technology, will be excluded.

The speed with which technology is changing can be a challenge for the people leaving the working place. Digital exclusion is not going to disappear anytime soon. In the EU only 61% from those aged between 65 and 74 are online, and only 10% for the users over 80s. This leads to a total of 20 million citizens who are offline. The group is composed of people excluded because of the lack of skills or access, and some people who are not connected because of their own will.

However, most people are reluctant to go online due to a lack of confidence in their ability to learn. Usually, people over 50s are rarely represented in media images or are represented in sensitive situations (with grey hair, helped by youngsters etc). The socio-economic factors, such as gender and ethnic segregation, can impact the extent to which digital devices are used. Minorities usually have a lower access to technology than the majoritarian populations. The use of technology is an ethnic-experience and a gender-experience, which has significant costs. It is estimated that 1 trillion dollars were lost due to the fact that women were excluded from access to technology.

Digital inclusion is increasingly prioritized on the policy agenda of different organizations. The Biden administration decided to support digital inclusion with 65 billion dollars. The UN has its own documents addressing this issue.

A broad coalition of stakeholders will be necessary in order to address this problem, comprising governments, civil society organizations, and the private sector.

Dr. Jolanda Lindenberg (PhD - Social Cultural Anthropologist), Leyden Academy, presented the results of an interview study on the experience of old people during the COVID-19 lockdowns in the Netherlands. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on issues related to digital connectivity and more. The questions of how the old people were represented and treated in the media have generated intensive debates, as many resented being treated as an unitary group. With regards to the digital connectedness, the COVID-19 pandemic represented a perceived forced introduction to the digital world, and an impetus to come online, while for others these advantages were not feasible for everyone. For some, the digital represented only a surrogate of the physical interactions (physical disconnectedness), giving a sense of lack of solidarity (solidarity disconnected). Her key message is that it is important to look at heterogeneity among older adults. There is a need to incorporate their voices and keep an eye on possibilities, while carefully considering the framing and the language use (inclusivity).

Mr. Ittay Mannheim (PhD Candidate in the Euro Ageism Innovative Training Network, Eindhoven, the Netherlands, presented a research project about the relation between aging and the development of new technologies. He argued that sometimes ageism is a barrier in accessing technology (not the age/being old). The discourse on ageism (understood as cognitive decline, fragility) is defined as a problem, while digital technology as the solution. There is also an emphasis on developing technologies for care and healthcare for this group, and researchers found that ageism can be embedded in the design process for these technologies. The most easily identifiable form of ageism is the exclusion of the elderly from the process of creation. This begs the questions: who are the people involved in this process, and how are they involved in the design process. He mentioned a way to identify self-ageism or negative perspectives on aging and technology by saying „I am too old for/to use this". The presence of technology can induce stereotype threats (technology is seen as being used by the young and associated with new) and ageism.

Mr. Tobias Gotthardt, Member of the Bavarian Parliament, FREIE WÄHLER (Independent Voters), Chair of the Committee on Federal and European Affairs and Interregional Relations, Vice-chairman Commission for education discussed about the digital transformation in Germany with a special focus on Bavaria and the educational system. He mentioned in his intervention that Bavaria is one of the leading regions in Germany in terms of e-government and digital public services. In 2020, it launched an app as a digital one-stop shop for all levels of e-government. Digital education is an important topic for the country, and more than 2 billion euros have been invested since 2018 to improve the digital development in schools.

In Germany, and especially in Bavaria, the elections have been digitalized for many levels, while e-petitions are useful instruments for political participation. Digital democracy can increase transparency (e.g .the institutions publish documents on the internet). The internet has democratized opinion and has contributed to a stronger visibility of previously unnoticed people. The political parties in Germany have developed instruments to encourage digital participation and there is also the possibility for e-participation and e-politics for members and non-members. However, no app can replace the emotion of a politician's speech.

The problem of fake news is pushed by the fact that social networks favour exclusion and like-minded approaches, which do not encourage diversity and debates. Sometimes, on the internet, opinion is for sale, for likes and followers created by fake profiles or click workers resulting in propaganda. It will be a challenge to create digital participation for everybody, not just for those who already use the technology.

With regards to the aspects related to digital democracy and the Conference on the Future of Europe, it's been problematic since the beginning, we need to be realistic and admit that, until today, this debate has not really been a public debate which includes the citizens, because not even the citizens' panels do not guarantee the expected level of participation. Even the European Convention in 2001 had more public visibility. If the Conference is to be a success, it needs to get out in the streets and squares and it needs an analogue and real dimension to complete the digital one.

Digital democracy and e-government need to be further developed and we (Europe) should be the home of digital democracy in a global leadership. Both of them have a social dimension. Digital democracy should complement, not replace the real and human dimensions of politics. The dialogue in digital democracy must be followed by action, otherwise participation creates frustration. Digital interaction should take place in a safe environment. The local and regional levels need to be supported in their approach to digitalization (are closer to local municipalities). He concluded saying that a new digital participation act is required, with politicians, business, and science, and with all levels of participation from local to European.

The Q&A session allowed the participants to comment and debate about the ideas and topics presented, as well as to respond to the questions addressed. A summary of the ideas expressed can be seen below:

➢ Digital vote should not be exclusive, you should still have the possibility to have your vote at the ballot box. All over the world, older people vote in higher numbers than younger people.
➢ In the future we may have a shift in the way the workplace is defined. It is possible in some fields to work from home. The EU can invest in the areas left behind in this situation. The next step should refer to how can you connect everybody, knowing that a number of people will not be able to do it, because the infrastructure is not enough, since there is a need to be able to buy smartphones which are updated quite frequently, forcing the users to replace them, leading to questions about the sustainability and costs
➢ The Fundamental Rights Agency (The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights) will conduct a study on digitalization and the rights of all people (in the EU).

The following question was addressed through Slido: how the EU legislators can improve digital inclusion, and whether it is a national competence or can the EU do something at this level? **Dr. Caroline van Dullemen** stressed that the EU can stimulate the digital transformation, and address the social disparities in many countries, suggesting as possibilities: investments in in comparative research among the Member States, discussions about best practices; the European learning agenda, mentioning the initiative of European Universities regarding the development of a lifelong curriculum from a European perspective, which can stimulate national governments to do more. Thus: Education wise, economic wise and research wise there are many opportunities at European level.

A general idea repeated by many speakers and participants was that the management of digital transformation, e-democracy and e-governance needs more and diverse participants. At the same time, the EU can do more, especially in terms of support for research in these areas.

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