DIGITELD PROJECT - The DIGITalization of ELDerly

Country Report - Belgium

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I. Introduction

The main objective of this report is to examine Belgium's position regarding older people's Media and Information (MIL) and Digital Literacy (DL) competence and knowledge. The phenomenon of digital misinformation and fake news takes on greater prominence among those with poor digital skills, a situation that is particularly evident in the over-65 population. The intent, therefore, is to raise awareness regarding the specific digital needs of the elderly and to promote initiatives that can increase their MIL and DL skills. This will not only improve their ability to navigate the contemporary media landscape but will also help strengthen social resilience to the phenomenon of fake news, thus ensuring greater protection for a vulnerable segment of the population. Understanding the definitions of MIL and DL and Fake News is crucial in this report.

MIL, or media and information literacy, provides individuals with crucial skills to address contemporary challenges, such as the spread of misinformation and hate speech, as well as the erosion of trust in media and advances in technologies such as artificial intelligence. MIL encompasses information, media and digital literacy skills, improving people's ability to navigate information and learning environments both online and offline (UNESCO, 2022).

On the other hand, DL, or digital literacy, indicates the ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate, and generate information safely and effectively using digital technologies. This skill set is essential for employment, securing decent work and promoting entrepreneurship. DL includes skills that can be defined by terms such as computer literacy, ICT literacy, information literacy and media literacy (UNESCO, 2018).

As defined by Gelfert in 2018, "fake news is best defined as the deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims as news, where the claims are misleading by design".

Together, DL, MIL and Fake News pose an obstacle to the process of acquiring and disseminating accurate and reliable knowledge, undermining trust in the media environment and compromising the ability to detect and counter misinformation.

A - Aging in the Digital Era: The significance of media literacy among individuals over 65 and the associated risks of fake news

As we navigate through the 21st century, two megatrends are reshaping the fabric of our societies: the ageing population and the digital revolution. These trends are not merely background phenomena; they are central forces that require our immediate and innovative response. The demographic landscape is undergoing a profound transformation, with those aged 65 and over already accounting for nearly one-fifth of the population—a figure projected to grow to 30% by 2070. As shown by the following figure from ISTAT, the median age in the EU-27 is projected to increase by 4.5 years between 2019 and 2050, to reach 48.2 years.

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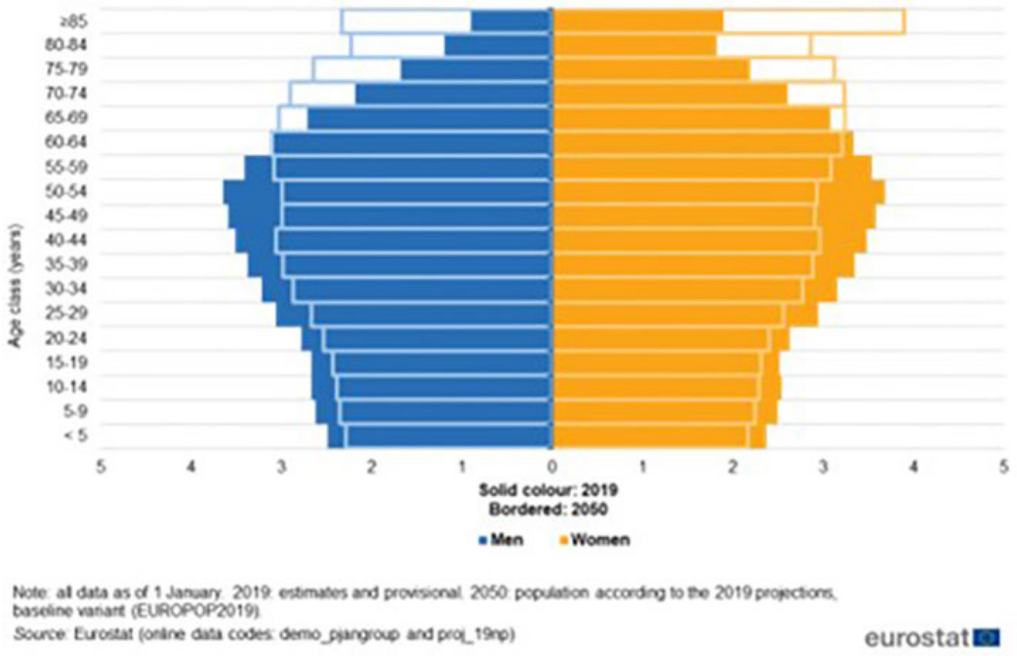

Figure 1: Population Pyramids, EU-27, 2019 and 2050 (% share of total population) Eurostat, 2019

The social implications of this change are profound and require an organizational framework that upholds the principles of human dignity, freedom, democracy, and equality. Central to this framework is a fundamental respect for older people that transcends antiquated notions of old age and emphasizes the immense value that older people contribute to society. Parallel to demographic changes, digital transformation represents a powerful megatrend with the potential to redefine aging itself. The rise of digital technology offers unprecedented opportunities for active and healthy aging. It has the power to improve quality of life, foster independence, and shift the narrative from viewing older people as vulnerable to recognizing them as valuable. In the digital age, Media & Information Literacy (MIL) skills are not a luxury but a necessity. These skills are critical to navigating the intersection of these megatrends, ensuring that older adults are not left behind as we move forward. In a world forever changed by the COVID-19 pandemic, in which the Internet has emerged as a "common good," the disparity in digital literacy, particularly among older adults, presents a challenge to inclusion. Governments and institutions have a duty to bridge this gap, not only by providing access to technology, but also by promoting an environment conducive to learning and engagement for all ages. Data on Internet use by older age groups are scarce and, when they are available, often exclude people over the age of 74. Yet the need for such data is undeniable, as demonstrated by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), which included respondents over age 75 in its background paper for a key conference in 2020. The results were stark: only 20 percent of people over age 75 said they use the internet occasionally, in sharp contrast to the 98 percent usage rate among 16-29 year old's reported in the 2019 Fundamental Rights Survey.

It is clear that digital literacy is not only a component of education, but is essential for participation in society, even for older generations. Currently, older people benefit only marginally from the opportunities offered by digitization and rarely figure as a priority in digital literacy education and training initiatives. To remedy this situation, barriers need to be tackled head-on and a successful combination of digital technologies and aging needs to be created. A recent systematic review examined 40 empirical studies ranging

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from 2005 to 2019, shedding light on the importance of media education for older adults. Initially, many older adults engage in online communication for specific needs, such as staying in touch with family or accessing health information. However, their digital engagement gradually expands from basic use to media content creation and critical analysis of information such as news and advertisements. This progression is critical to making informed decisions and participating responsibly in the digital world. Seniors, especially those who have not used online communication professionally, often struggle to understand and evaluate media content, including discerning reliable news sources. Given the diversity of the elderly in terms of life experiences and interests, personalized pedagogical approaches are needed. In addition, ongoing support is crucial, and the concept of the "warm expert" has been proposed as a valuable resource. Civil society plays a key role in promoting media literacy initiatives for older adults by fostering a supportive environment where individuals can share their experiences and help each other in the digital landscape (Council of Europe, 2022).

Especially concerning critical topics like health, the spread of misinformation on social media isn't just about stirring up negative emotions. It's also about the polarization that undermines constructive dialogue and isolates individuals, which is particularly detrimental to health issues. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a flood of information, dubbed an "infodemic" by the World Health Organization. This included both reliable and erroneous information. Disinformation, associated with malicious intent, involves fake news and conspiracy theories, while misinformation, though not malicious, spreads inaccurate information. Misinformation in health often carries a negative tone, relies heavily on anecdotes rather than scientific evidence, and spreads quickly. This is concerning because it can lead to misconceptions and potentially harmful actions (Vivion, M, 2024).

Therefore, improving the media literacy of older people and fostering a supportive environment that promotes continuing education and digital literacy can help mitigate the negative impact of fake news on older people's well-being and decision-making.

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II. Demographic and social context: a belgian perspective: a focused examination of Belgium's elderly population.

Belgium, divided into three main regions—Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels-Capital—has an aging population. The average age in 2019 was 41.7 years, with life expectancy higher in the Flemish Region compared to Wallonia and Brussels. As of 2023, about 2,700 individuals are aged 100 or older, indicating significant longevity but also the need for robust senior support systems (EURYDICE, 2023).

According to STATISTA, as shown in Fig.2, in 2023, approximately 799,500 people in Belgium were aged between 55 and 59, and roughly 102,200 people were aged between 90 and 94. The largest age group was formed by those between 55 and 59 years old, whereas those over 100 years old formed the smallest age group. In 2023, approximately 2,700 people in Belgium were 100 years or older.

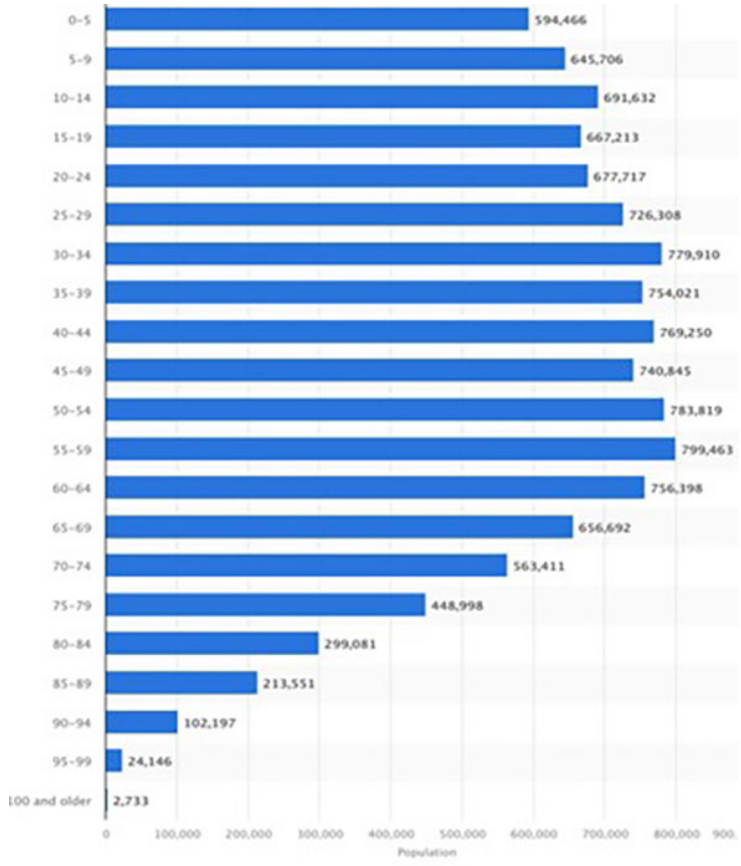

Figure 2: Populaion of Belgium in 2023, by age group (STATISTA, 2023)

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III. Digital literacy and combating fake news: a synhesis of reports, platforms, and projects pertaining to the digital literacy of the belgian elderly.

In the report published by Vlaamse Ouderenraad in 2020 with a focus on Flemish region, the authors discussed the internet activities of seniors, finding that 72% use the internet for communication, with email being the main tool. E-banking was the second most used service, followed by Skype and photo sharing. A third of respondents also did online shopping. The survey revealed that most seniors cannot imagine life without the internet, as it is a part of their present life.

Digitalization of everyday life can be challenging for older adults, especially those without much pre-knowledge about computers, smartphones, and the internet. The digital skills instructors' accounts reveal that the challenges begin with the vocabulary needed to understand digital devices and services. Older ICT novices often struggle with jargon and technical terms, which persists today. This issue is particularly prevalent among older populations in non-English speaking countries like Belgium.

In addition to language issues, instructors also face difficulties explaining hardware and software functions at the most basic level. Previous research has highlighted difficulties learning using keyboards and/or mice, as well as on-off buttons. Despite changes in browser interfaces and input forms, generic problems for understanding website and browser logical structures persist.

The authors of this study provide a realistic view of how some older adults experience the advancing digitalization of everyday life and struggle to make sense of digital devices and services. For these individuals, it can be a source of stress, dis-empowerment, incapability, and dependence on others.

The instructors encounter the troubles digitally inexperienced older adults face regularly, providing valuable insights into the challenges they face in acquiring basic digital skills.

While some of these issues have been reported in the literature on digital skills acquisition of older adults, there is no comprehensive account or emphasis on their salience. The authors argue that the digital skills instructors' accounts offer a valuable perspective on the challenges faced by older adults in navigating the digitalization of everyday life. This article highlights that even the most basic tenets of digital technology are not trivial or simple to grasp for older adults, especially those who have never used computers in their professional lives. The study's observations show that older adults struggle with ICT-jargon and specific components and concepts of hardware and software on the most basic levels, far below the aims of widespread academic and policy definitions of 'digital literacy', 'digital skills', or 'digital competence'.

The authors argue that future definitions of basic digital literacy, skills, or competences should be more high-level for certain segments of the older population. These competences include operating devices, connecting to the internet, setting up accounts and

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profiles, finding and retrieving information, and understanding how to access and install applications. These competences require comprehension, memory, and dexterity, which can become difficult due to physical ageing.

For digitally illiterate older adults, nothing is trivial, even if it might seem like that to routine technology users. Academic definitions and political frameworks of digital literacy need to start at a very basic level for older adults who have not been exposed to digital technology. Full-fledged digital literacy, skills, and competencies include much more than the mere technical abilities of operating devices and platforms.

The authors suggest that these fundamental elements should include turning devices on and off, operating the hardware and software interfaces, understanding how to access and install applications, setting up accounts with secure passwords, and operating search machines to retrieve useful information. These issues should receive attention in digital skills frameworks.

This study focuses on the experiences of older adults in Belgium, a Dutch-speaking region, Flanders, and cannot be extrapolated to other countries. The qualitative nature of the data does not provide insights into the widespread problems among older populations due to the multidimensional heterogeneity of this age segment. The data was collected for an overarching research project with multiple research questions, and the material was coded in several iterations without applying a full-fledged grounded theory. The study did not intend to explain the fundamental problems older adults face with digital literacy requirements, and the focus was on the perspective of instructors, not the older course participants themselves. Future research could study systematically how digital inclusion frameworks can guide training programs to help participants overcome initial hurdles in learning and retaining basic digital skills to handle their everyday lives autonomously in an increasingly digitalizing society.

The document emphasizes the digital challenges faced by the elderly population, with statistics showing that 58% of individuals aged 55 to 74 lack basic digital skills, and 15% have never used the internet. The rapid evolution of digital applications presents a barrier to participation for many elderly individuals, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address digital literacy gaps.

Specific challenges identified include the fact that 23% of Flemish elderly aged 65-74 do not use the internet, indicating a significant digital divide within this demographic. Moreover, concerns are raised regarding the disappearance or increased cost of alternatives to digital services, leading to potential exclusion of those who prefer traditional methods or lack digital access.

The document advocates for the development of an e-inclusion policy to support elderly individuals in navigating digital technologies. This policy would focus on raising awareness, implementing intergenerational projects, and providing digital literacy training to enhance the digital skills of the elderly population. Additionally, the policy aims to ensure access to essential non-digital services for all elderly individuals, safeguarding their right to personalized assistance.

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Financial support is highlighted as a crucial aspect of promoting digital inclusion among the elderly. Recommendations include advocating for affordable internet access for financially vulnerable individuals, revising social telecom rates, and providing installation support to facilitate internet connectivity for all elderly citizens.

Professional training is identified as a key strategy to address the digital literacy gap among the elderly. The document calls for the training of digital professionals who can assist digitally illiterate users in navigating digital applications and services effectively. Furthermore, investments in non-digital personal services are recommended to guarantee access to essential services for all elderly individuals, regardless of their digital proficiency.

Another report published by Deloitte, Digital Consumer Trends 2021 Belgium, reports the following data.

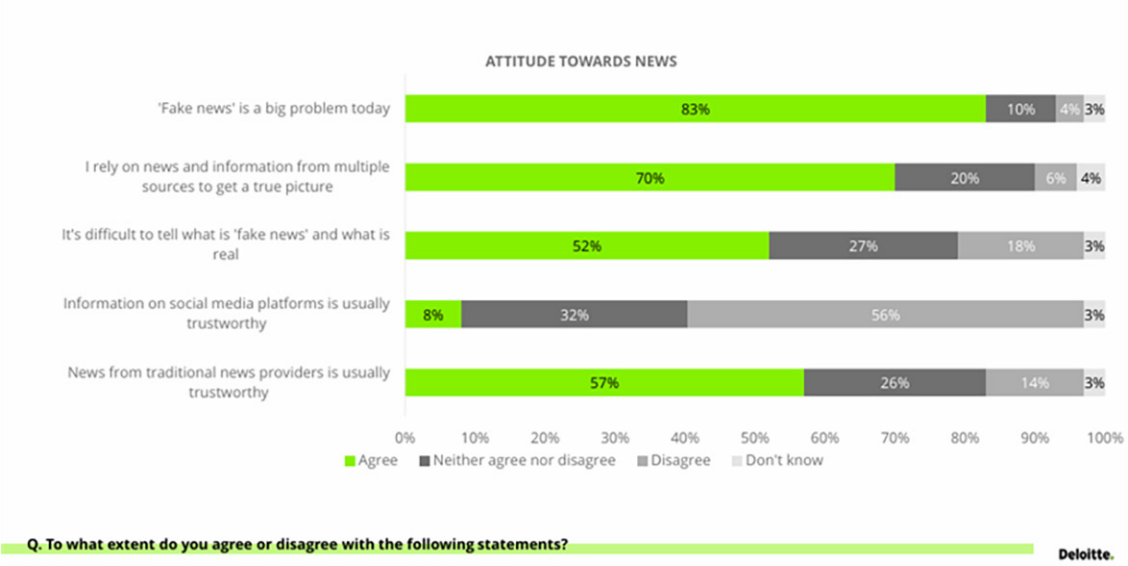

Figure 3: Belgians lost trust in media and prefer to gather different sources

As showed in the Fig.3, almost all of the respondents (83%) recognize that Fake News is a fairly relevant issue nowadays while only 70% search on multiple sites to verify the veracity of a news. For little more than half of the interviewees it is difficult to recognize the false news from the true ones and only the 18% considers that recognize a fake new is easy. Also, 56% of the respondents believe social media platforms being an untrustworthy information's' provider and almost the same percentage believe traditional new provider to be trustworthy.

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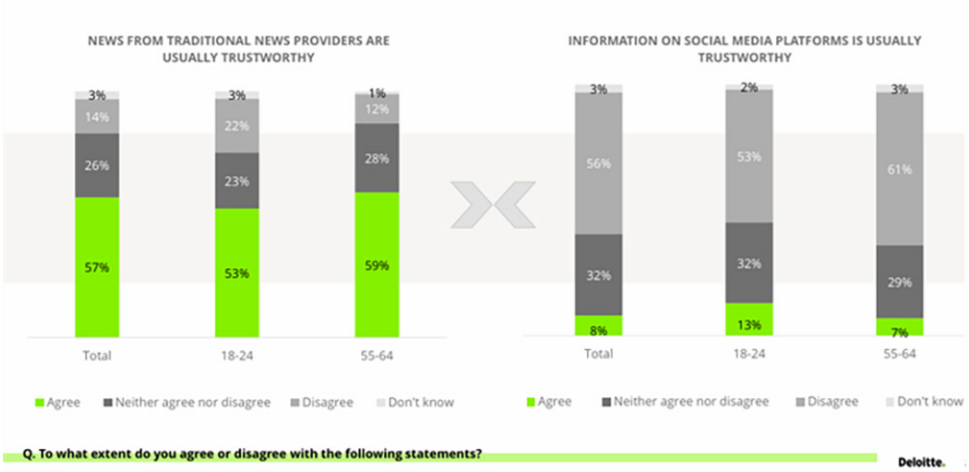

Figure 4: Traditional news providers remain the most trusted source of information

A showed in the Fig.4, the 55-64 age group is the most used to traditional sources of information at the expense of a marked reluctance to find information on social media.

For a cross-country comparison, Fig.5 shows that Belgians tend to trust social media less than other countries.

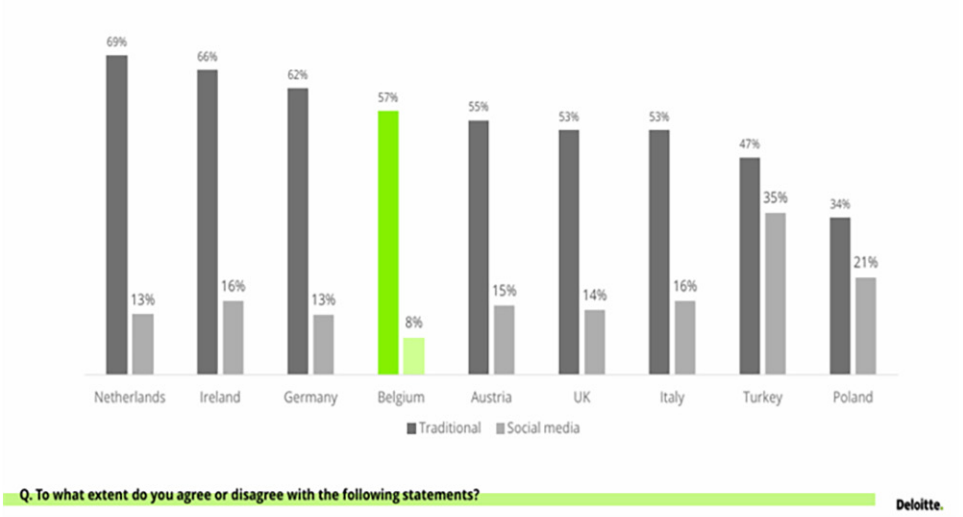

Figure 5: News from traditional news providers/ social media are usually trustworthy

There are several initiatives and projects in which Belgium participates, with the aim of supporting the community in combating misinformation, media literacy and skill acquisition. Among them:

- DISINFOCHECK - Monitoring disinformation in Belgium and Luxembourg: is a cross-community, multilingual collaboration between Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Université Saint-Louis – Bruxelles, Mediawijs, Média Animation, EU DisinfoLab, Agence France-Presse, RTBF, RTL Luxembourg and Athens Technology Center. It brings together an experienced and extensive network of fact-checkers, disinformation analysts, media literacy organisations and academics to detect, analyse and expose emerging harmful disinformation campaigns. The project thereby pays specific attention to disinformation that targets pan-EU or EU policies.
- A HEALTHY DIGITAL EUROPE (AHDE): With this project the three different partners want to encourage learning for adults and improve the accessibility of adult educa-

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tion. More specific: green and digital skills, quality education for seniors, healthy and digital lifestyle. The project has the objective to help adults to take an active part in our digital society. The outcomes will be the creating of quality learning materials of all kinds to improve the digital skills of adult learners. Another objective is a greener and healthier life. This goes hand in hand with a basic knowledge of digital readiness. The outcomes will be concrete manuals, tutorials, recipes, attitudes for a greener and healthier lifestyle.

- Project e-EngAGEd: (Intergenerational Digital Engagement), funded by the European Commission (Programme CERV),is toimprove critical thinking and media literacy by training young volunteers to act as facilitators that can transmit their knowledge to older adults. The objectives are: Improve critical thinking and media literacy, training young volunteers as coaches to impart their knowledge to adults and senior; Improve intergenerational responsibility and digital commitment in society, providing spaces for debate and exchanges amongst citizens of different ages on disinformation, digital citizenship, and civic commitment; Increase trust in media to promote political participation, directly involving journalists in the definition of training content for media literacy, organising European-level debates on journalism and panels on the role of journalists and media in the political awareness of citizens.
- FERMI is a three-years long project funded by the European Union flagship research and innovation programme Horizon Europe. The project consortium consists of 17 organisations leaders in criminology, social sciences, public policy, technological development, innovation management and law enforcement agencies. Non legato direttamente al target elderly, ma come il progetto DIGITELD, ha l'obiettivo di Analyse the direct risks posed by Disinformation and Fake news to the offline world and minimise the impact , Design training and education material for European Police Authorities, other professionals and stakeholders. Il Progetto non ha come target specific older people, ma sicuramente contribuisce a contrastare il fenomeno delle fake news e recognize the potential of disinformation and fake news and take steps to tackle it.
- One useful platform, in which Belgian partners are involved, is the AGE PLATFORM. https://www.age-platform.eu/news-resources/. They seek to combat ageism, promote human rights throughout the life course, reduce inequalities and enable everyone to live a full and dignified life. To achieve this mission: We raise the aspirations and needs of older people bridging the gap between them and policymakers; We transform our members' experiences and ideas into policy proposals, advocacy, campaigning, dissemination actions and projects; We support our members' active involvement in AGE's work while promoting mutual learning and networking.

A - National Policies: An overview of the strategies implemented to enhance media and digital literacy

Most EU Member States lack a specific institution or authority to monitor complaints related to equal access to digital public services. Instead, they rely on existing authorities and general approaches, which can hear complaints of discrimination based on various grounds, without specifically targeting age discrimination. Information on age discrimination monitoring is scarce, but some EU Member States' ombuds institutions, national equality bodies, and advisory bodies provide some insight. The variety of existing systems contributes to a lack of systematic evaluation and conclusions. In most countries, reports make general reference to difficulties in accessing public services that are un-

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dergoing digitalisation. In Belgium the 2021 annual report of the mediator/ombudsperson for the public pensions service addressed developments related to 'digital by default', reporting a series of problems linked to the digitalisation of tax forms and subsequent complaints. In 2020, the mediation service for patient rights also highlighted problems with the confidentiality and privacy of health data, notably complaints regarding unauthorised access to e-health records, undisclosed e-access records and sharing of sensitive psychiatric data, with a particular focus on care homes and older patients (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023).

According to the 2022 Belgian country report co-authored by Eugenio Mantovani and Erika Ellyne of the Fundamental Rights Research Centre of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, all three federated regions have implemented digitization plans/programs as central components of their policies, recognizing the specific needs of the elderly to ensure equitable access to online public services.

The Brussels Region's "Plan d'appropriation numérique" for 2021-2024 aims to reduce disparities in digital access, use, and knowledge by identifying six priority groups to be supported: job seekers, youth, older adults, people with disabilities, disadvantaged populations, and women. Action 14 of this plan aims to provide older adults with safe training in new technologies, with initiatives extending to both nursing and retirement homes. Nursing homes receive support for organizing and funding programs to improve basic digital skills, prioritizing training in communication, banking, online public services, and cybersecurity.

In Flanders, equal opportunity policy focuses on local e-inclusion through the "Iedereen Digitaal" (All Digital) action plan. The March 2022 Flemish Plan for Aging includes five actions to promote digitization among older people, including educational policies to combat digital exclusion, networking of "digibuddies," monitoring of digital skills of civil servants, investment in communication technologies, and a focus on vulnerable older populations.

The "Walloon Digital Strategy" allocates funds to improve the region's digital skills, including projects aimed at digital inclusion through increased public digital spaces and female workforce participation in the IT sector. Digital literacy and skills are emphasized under the federal poverty reduction policy, with the establishment of an "experts by experience" service to promote the use of e-ID for simplified access to rights and services. Specific funding opportunities, events and organizational support are provided under this program.

Ensuring digital participation for all is a key goal of Flemish inclusion policy, which aims to prevent older people from falling behind in the digital age while facilitating their use of digital tools. This requires attention to the different thresholds and opportunities that digitization presents, along with the necessary support measures.

Digital inclusion is seen as a cross-cutting policy goal, requiring integration across all policy areas rather than being confined to specific departments such as education or media. The Flemish Council for Older Persons supports a more integrated digital inclusion policy, overseen by a coordinating minister. Under the Everyone Digital action plan, each

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minister is expected to allocate resources and prioritize digital inclusion to effectively support vulnerable groups online.

An effective Flemish e-inclusion policy requires thorough mapping and monitoring of all aspects, including access to the Internet and digital applications, citizens' knowledge and skills, obstacles encountered, and the impact of initiatives. It is critical to include the elderly over the age of 75 in research efforts to address their specific digital needs, which are often overlooked. The fifth strategic objective of the Flemish Strategic Plan for Literacy aims to improve digital literacy in all age groups, specifically targeting the 58 percent of people aged 55-74 who lack sufficient basic skills to participate in the digital society.

To address these needs, the Flemish Council for the Elderly calls for specific funds to support initiatives related to digital literacy. They suggest public announcements, such as the "Move in Your Room" campaign, which provided ten-minute exercise sessions for seniors at home. Similarly, an accessible program focusing on useful digital skills, safe Internet use, and digital fraud recognition during off-peak hours would be useful for this demographic (Vlaamse Ouderenraad, 2020).

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IV. Conclusive Strategies for Inclusive Digital Engagement

The issue of media literacy and combating fake news within the target population over the age of 65 is a significant priority for the European Union, particularly in light of the upcoming European elections in June. It's crucial to equip and engage a segment of the population that is often overlooked when drafting European projects. Through the DIGITELD initiative, we aim to bridge this gap by enhancing skills and, more importantly, raising awareness about the use of technology and media literacy on critical issues such as health and politics for those over 65. Enabling our senior citizens to discern factual information from misinformation is not just a matter of education—it's a protective measure for democracy and societal wellbeing.

To achieve true media literacy among the elderly, it is imperative to address the barriers of accessibility and inclusivity. It's not just about providing the tools but also ensuring that the elderly can use them with confidence. This involves:

- Improving Digital Infrastructure: Ensuring that high-speed internet access is available and affordable for the elderly, especially in rural or underserved areas.
- User-Friendly Design: Encouraging technology developers to create user-friendly interfaces that accommodate the needs of older adults, such as larger text, intuitive design, and voice-activated commands.
- Promoting Intergenerational Learning: Encouraging younger family members to assist in the digital education of their elders, creating a family-based support system that fosters continuous learning and bonding.

A Strategic Call to Action: Empowering the Elderly with Critical Media Literacy Skills

As we approach the European elections, it is a call to action for all stakeholders involved—governments, NGOs, tech companies, and communities—to prioritize media literacy for the elderly. By empowering them with the knowledge and tools to navigate the digital world safely, we ensure that their voices are heard and that they remain an active and informed part of the electorate. It's not just about preparing for an election; it's about upholding the values of an inclusive and informed democratic society.

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