

Older people in a digital world

Risks and opportunities of the Internet

Our world is noticeably transforming into an increasingly digitalised world. The networking of devices into systems, the automation of activities and services, the replacement of people and tangible material by digital technologies open up new possibilities for action and freedom, but also involve new risks.

This paper by the Federal Association of Senior Citizens' Organisations in Germany identifies fundamental issues that arise from the increasing digitalisation of the environment in an area that is of particular

importance for the daily lives of older persons: the Internet. It identifies the obstacles to competent Internet use and the measures needed to make the positive opportunities offered by the Internet accessible and safe for all. Further position papers are planned on other aspects, such as digitalisation in healthcare.

The Internet, a matter of age

More than twelve million people in Germany have one thing in common: they are offline, which means they are not taking advantage of the opportunities the Internet has to offer. 95 percent¹ of them are 50 years or older. At the same time, the number of users in older age groups² is rising. More than half of these increases,

1 DIVSI Internet Milieu Study 2016.

2 D21 Digital Index 2016. The D21 Digital Index is a continuation of the (N)Online Atlas published since 2002. It records the Internet usage of the German-speaking resident population over 14 years of age according to sociodemographic criteria (approx. 70 million persons out of an estimated total population of 82.8 million at the end of 2016). The D21 Digital Index, which has been published annually by Initiative D21 since 2013, provides qualitative information on Internet use. Generalised statements on Internet use by all over 50- or 60-year-olds are too inaccurate, because in the older age groups, the proportion of online users per decade of life is rapidly decreasing: In 2016, it will still be 83% for 50- to 59-year-olds, 69% for 60- to 69-year-olds and only 36% for over 70-year-olds. Among those under 50 years of age, the proportion of online users in 2016 is over 90%, among those under 30 years of age, almost 100% use of the Internet can be assumed.

however, can be explained by the fact that younger people are growing into the older age groups. And the older people who do have access to the Internet use it primarily in a stationary³ manner. In addition, many are more “indirect” online users, whose digital participation depends largely on their partners or family members. Once they are unavailable any longer, they often lack the support they need to stay online.

Yet, the assumption is unrealistic that the problem will simply be “outgrown”, because successive younger cohorts are more experienced with new technologies and media. This is unlikely due to the ever faster pace of technological change: In the future, too, there will be persons of all ages who are unable or unwilling to cope with the constantly changing new technologies. People who are denied access to the Internet will not be able to take advantage of the opportunities offered by digitalisation and will lose opportunities to participate. Especially for people with reduced mobility and for those who, due to their advanced age, are losing more and more contact with their peers, the Internet can provide not only information and technical support, but also missing communication.

Digitalisation is changing the way we live and people need access to the digital world, but they also have the right to live offline: Buying a ticket, applying for an identity card, making a money transfer – this should

still be possible in the future even without the Internet.

1. Providing access and enabling opportunities

The Internet has become an indispensable element of public services of general interest. This applies to older as well as younger persons. It is therefore the task of the state to guarantee its citizens access to digital services and offers.

However, the provision of the technical prerequisites alone is not sufficient, because it is obvious that older citizens in particular must gain concrete experience with the Internet before they can be won over to the medium. Now that the legislator has removed a significant number of obstacles regarding liability for interference, the prerequisites have been created for the provision of a nationwide and universally accessible free Wi-Fi network.

This opens up the possibility of creating free access to the network in public spaces – in institutions, libraries and schools – and thus opportunities for practice and use. By making forms available on the Internet, persons with reduced mobility can also benefit. This, in turn, requires them to have actual access to the Internet. Local authorities should therefore feel obliged to ensure that such access is offered barrierfree in all public institutions under their control or for which they provide funding.

³ Stationary here refers to the digital use that is tied to a fixed location. This also includes the use of mobile devices that are not used in this sense, such as a laptop that is not used outside the home.

Municipalities are called upon above all in areas where they themselves are increasingly offering municipal services on the Internet, often exclusively. This holds equally true for local services that are not offered directly under municipal responsibility, such as local public transport. When setting up such services, BAGSO expects providers to ensure that non-users are not discriminated against.

Many cities and municipalities already make it easier for their older citizens to use digital services, offers and devices, but the number is still far too small. Especially in rural areas, where such networking possibilities are particularly needed, this task has not yet sufficiently been taken into account. It is not enough to rely solely on the Federal Government and its obligation to expand the broadband network. The local authorities themselves should ensure that they systematically provide a realm of experience and testing opportunities for people who have had difficulties with the Internet.

This is urgently needed, not least in assisted living facilities, in retirement and nursing homes and in health care facilities. In in-patient care, the financial means of older people are often very limited, making them unable to afford a SIM card or a flat rate. This is where the operators of such facilities are called upon, but also the public authorities that use public money to fund the construction or equipment of such facilities.

BAGSO proposes that public funding for these facilities should be linked to the creation of free Wi-Fi access in order to achieve rapid expansion. Such funding measures could be implemented at the municipal, county, state and federal level through voluntary commitments, i.e. they would not initially require any statutory regulation.

Technical offers should be accessible to all. However, the use of technology should always be taught in technical and media educational schemes, and should also be guided and accompanied in a gender- and age-sensitive manner. For this purpose, people are required who are familiar with the new technologies and who can convey their benefits to older people in their everyday lives and facilitate their use. This has already been implemented in some municipalities within the framework of publicly funded projects. BAGSO is calling for the availability of low-threshold centres to experience new technologies in all municipalities and that conditions be created for products to be tried out and even borrowed.

Many initiatives – mainly voluntary ones – are already organising their own experience and testing areas. However, they are complaining not only about tight financial resources, but also about a lack of space for meetings and qualification measures. Local authorities should reward their citizens' commitment by providing such initial orientation structures, for example by providing public spaces.

2. Reducing barriers and creating trust

People who have just started to gain experience with devices that are difficult for them to access and with confusing applications, and who at the same time only hear about the Internet in connection with warnings and abuse, will not even want to discover the opportunities these devices offer. This is why educational measures must ensure that opportunities and risks are presented in context, so that balanced judgements can emerge.

For years, manufacturers and developers of digital technology have been emphasizing their claim to bring self-explanatory technology to the market. From the point of view of older people in particular, many unfulfilled wishes remain. In spite of available guidelines for the design of user interfaces and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Internet access in Germany is often not user-friendly or designed for the disabled.

BAGSO calls on manufacturers and service providers to focus even more on self-explanatory technology in the design of devices and applications. Developers and manufacturers should be aware that hesitancy with regard to the Internet is also due to the complexity of interfaces. Other obstacles are the lack of user-friendly operating instructions as well as information and advertising materials that exclude older people through their mostly youth-oriented language and imagery.

“Less is more” – this principle is crucial when designing digital products intended primarily for personal use. Instead of a “switch-off” culture, the development of a “switch-on and join-in” culture should be promoted. Start-ups in particular could gain market opportunities here with creative solutions. Public sector competitions, but also competitions by organisations such as BAGSO are triggering rethinking processes and helping to make existing model solutions or those under development known to the public.

When using a social network or mobile application software, free usage against free access to personal data such as contacts, photos, etc. is a common financing model. However, every user should have the choice between disclosing desired data or another form of payment.

In this context, BAGSO calls on manufacturers and developers to create more offers that systematically focus on the careful handling of their users' data. This applies in particular to offers in the smart home or health sector that make everyday life easier for many older people and can save them strenuous journeys.

This will play a part in determining whether the Internet of Things will also be used intensively in private households of older people. The transparency of the data traffic between devices and manufacturers via the private network will be crucial for the trust that responsible consumers will have in such offers.

3. Shouldering responsibility

Although an increasing number of older people are now recognising the potential of digital devices and services, too many are still neglecting the Internet and the many related services. They are very concerned that they may find themselves in situations in the digital world that they cannot cope with or may even become victims of fraud. Education can help to overcome unfounded fears. There is now a wealth of initiatives that are being developed by older people for older people – often on a voluntary basis.

Until now they have not reached enough people, though. But there are still genuine security problems, which prevent not just older people from using some newly established Internet applications because they involve risks. Providers who bring analogue goods and services to the market generally take responsibility for ensuring the security of their offerings. They are required to eliminate security risks in advance, not only due to legal requirements but also out of competitive interest.

Data security, on the other hand, i.e. the dangers of being spied on or affected by malware, are risks that have only become a comprehensive problem in the course of digitalisation. However, the high standards of product security must also apply to online security standards. This is where BAGSO calls for a paradigm shift in the ICT industry: Up to now, it seems to be sufficient to demand more security awareness among users. But network security should no longer be the primary or even the sole responsibility of consumers.

BAGSO calls on manufacturers of Internet-based technology and service providers to ensure security and reliability and to offer only products and services that meet generally accepted security standards and warranty criteria.

Not least in social media, it is difficult to evaluate the information offered – not only for older people. For example, the determination of the source of texts, although technically possible – as is the case with Wikipedia, for example – is not supported. Transparency about the origin of information and the context would be helpful in all areas, so that users can evaluate the information and then decide for themselves what consequences to draw from it. BAGSO urges that the origin and context of texts, videos, etc. be made transparent for end users.

4. Creating structures and promoting media literacy

In order for older people to navigate a digital world safely and take advantage of the opportunities offered by the Internet without risk, a number of structural measures are needed in addition to those already mentioned.

Technology always requires a certain level of service. Good advice and service offers are particularly important for beginners. Making good practices known and creating further and qualitatively better offers can strengthen confidence in the digital world and encourage use. The tasks that municipalities need to perform in this respect have already been mentioned.

Media literacy is another prerequisite for digital participation. However, there are no binding targets and concrete measures for people of retirement age laid down in strategic concepts at federal and state level in view of the digitalisation of society, even though the need for lifelong learning is emphasized at the same time.

For just over 15 years now, publicly funded and usually local and time-limited projects have been carried out in this context. To date, though, they have not reached enough people. In order to ensure the sustainability and expansion of successful non-profit initiatives and publicly funded projects, BAGSO calls for the results, experience and existing municipal and local structures thus far to be expanded state- and nationwide in the sense of an IT education strategy for older people. BAGSO will participate in this endeavour.

Public universities should feel obliged to develop, evaluate and update media educational offerings from existing approaches. Conventional educational institutions usually no longer reach elderly people. This makes it all the more important to develop new forms of media education that actually address this target group. Media didactic concepts must take into account the learning biographies of older people.

The public media play a special role here. Since older people in particular use them intensively, there are opportunities within the regular programmes to clarify the digital opportunities for older people, to convey

basic knowledge about business models and functionalities of the digital world, but also to point out risks and dispel unjustified fears. Conceptually, they could fall back on formats that have been successful in the past, such as "Der 7. Sinn" (The 7th Sense). BAGSO recommends that the public media implement these concepts in low-threshold short reports on the digital world.

Some state media authorities focus on older people in their projects to promote media competence, above and beyond their legal mandate. BAGSO calls on the other state media institutions to follow these examples.

The Federal Government should initiate a dialogue between manufacturers and developers on the one hand and private users on the other in order to raise awareness of the problem. Relevant advisory councils at the Ministry of Consumer Protection, the Ministry of Education and Research and the Ministry of Economic Affairs could regularly monitor developments and make recommendations for their further elaboration.

The Federal Government's IT summits should regularly take up the perspective of private users and offer opportunities for exchanging opinions and experience. Here, too, the interests of older people are to be taken into account. Self-determination in old age is increasingly demanding confident use of digital technologies. Other countries in Europe are demonstrating that with the right framework conditions and suitable measures, modern digital participation of older persons can be a matter of course.

To this end, BAGSO recommends that all those who create offers on the Internet or for the Internet systematically make use of expert advice on ageing issues, and offers dialogue with companies that seek to bring adequate products and services onto the market.

This position paper was prepared by the members of the cross-association working group "New Media" and adopted by the BAGSO Executive Board in October 2017.

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Through its 120 member organisations, BAGSO represents several million senior citizens in Germany.

About BAGSO

The German National Association of Senior Citizens' Organisations is a non-partisan umbrella organisation of civil society institutions in the field of senior citizens' work and ageing policy in Germany. As a representative of the interests of older persons, we consistently call on politics, society and business to offer framework conditions that allow for a good and dignified life in older age. In doing so, we also have the interests of older people of tomorrow and beyond firmly in view.

At the United Nations, BAGSO is actively involved in the development of a UN Convention for Older People. BAGSO is also a member of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (GAROP), an international alliance of over 200 civil society organisations that advocates for the rights of older people. BAGSO's Secretariat for International Policy on Ageing provides information on current international developments in ageing policy and contributes the interests of civil society to international processes.



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