ESSACHESS

Ageing and Digital Communication

Guest editors

Dr. Loredana IVAN, Associate Professor, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, European Network of Ageing Studies Chair

Dr. Alina DUDUCIUC, Senior Lecturer, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Health Communication TWG-ECREA

Introduction

Digital communication is nowadays prevalent and shapes the way we interact with co-workers, families, friends and neighbors, defining also our opportunities to be properly informed, civil engaged and getting faster in the possession of any goods or services we might need. The access to digital communication became an indicator of welfare and social inclusion. We can hardly imagine our lives in the absence of the digital devices.

There is general acceptance that, in the process of digital communication appropriation and the experience of use, some groups are more vulnerable that others: a vulnerability sometimes described in the literature as *digital gap* or *digital divide*, and sometimes being simply a form of numerous social inequalities some groups and communities would face in comparison with others: a core-peripheral social structure that have been always at concern, just that currently is very much shaped by technology than by other types of resources.

The vulnerable groups are the same: old, low-educated, women, minorities, disable, coming from disadvantaged socio-economic background, from poor regions or remote areas, in countries with lower investments in the latest technologies and in the infrastructure.

The current special issues brings into attending the use of digital technologies later in life and shed the light of a social groups that would always left behind in the technology adoption, not necessarily because they are old, but because we will all have a limited capacity to embrace and develop new skills in areas and with devices we have not been used in out formative year. So that being less skilled and an even a bit reluctant in using some of the emerging digital technologies could be described as natural process once we grow older.

However, some of the current digital inequalities affecting older people in particular do not relate with their limited capacity to keep pace with the new technological trends. Instead, the digital divide we encounter at older people lays at the interaction between age and some other variables named here (education,

familiarity with different technologies, area of residence, group belongingness). For example, in countries largely affected by migration for work (as Romania for example), older people are those left behind. Their poor technological skills are a result of social-loneliness, living in rural areas with poor Internet infrastructure, have lower economic resources to even afford Internet and digital devices, most of the times ignored in any kind of digital inclusion policies– which normally target school children, youth, and workers. If they are already part of marginalized community (as for example migrants, Roma) their chances to be marginalized in the new digital world become even higher.

There is a vicious cycle of becoming marginalized in a digital communication world and age plays a moderator role: it accentuates some of the important factors which have been always at the concern for creating social inequalities. If so, why we even care about the relationships between age and digital technology? Firstly because aging is a natural process, and contrary to other social groups that we might or might not be part of, we will be part of the older people group one day; and with the pervasiveness of the new communication technology in our lives (an irreversible phenomena as well), we expect digital technologies to be an intrinsic part of our ageing process.

Second, because digital technologies are changing more rapidly than we are able to change. It is generally accepted that technology is one of the most dynamic area of our society, which has grown exponentially over the past 10 years, and it has become already very difficult for humans to keep pace with the change. Therefore by ignoring in the present difficulties and opportunities older people might face when interacting with technology, it means to ignore that fact that we will face maybe similar challenges in 20 –30 years from now.

When we look to the literature of digital technology appropriation and use at different generations, we can notice the fact that the focus of the research is rather different when we talk about the youth *versus* the older people. Current research in social sciences focuses on how to stimulate older people to use digital technologies and increase their social participation, independent living and the sense of belonging, whereas research topics regarding the digital technologies at younger people revolved around the topic of dependencies and risks. Still, the two age groups are not that disjunctive as one might think: there is evidence that both young and older Internet users appreciate the entertainment and creative role of different digital technologies, the possibility to stay continuously in contact with the loved ones and the visual content. Also, there are studies showing that older people are aware of some of the risks associated to the (over)use of digital technologies, but they tend not to project such risks on themselves but on the younger generations.

The current special issue, *Aging and Digital Communication* brings together some of the most important topics of the ageing studies use when we discuss technology appropriation. This issue is covered by Ioana Iancu and Bogdan Iancu

with a suggestive title on the ambivalence of the use of ICTs by the Romanian adults, *I Love It, But It Is Too Complicated. Aging Adults' Perspective on Mobile Technology Acceptance*. The article is intriguing as the participants (aged 50 years and over) into research belong to some of the most problematic context when it comes to affordability of ICTs for older population. In these cases, as authors highlighted, Romania is on the last position among European countries in respect to digitalization (*Digital Economy and Society Index* 2017), and the level of technology acceptance rate is rather low among seniors over 60 years.

One of the prevalent public debates surrounding the use of ICTs before and during Covid-19 pandemic has claimed parental or institutional control on the children's media use. As Galit Nimrod, Dafna Lemish and Nelly Elias highlight in their article *Mediating grannies: Caring for young grandchildren who use digital media,* past studies neglected the meaningful role played by grandparents, older siblings and nannies in optimization of the children's interactive and non-interactive media use. Nimrod, Lemish and Elias's research is the first to explores the grandparent's (N=488, aged 50-73) mediation practise (i.e. restrictive, instructive, supervision, co-use and technological) when they take care of their young children (aged 2-7) as well as their perceived familiarity with children's digital devices and platforms. The findings give important insights on the role of grandparents in mediating children's media use in various specific context related to grandparents' digital skills, past mediation and socio-demographical characteristics (age, gender, income, education, employment, health condition).

Older people creativity has been neglected in contemporary societies, and sometimes digitalization brings to light the ambivalent attitude of people toward old age. The article of Béatrice Crettenand Pecorini and Emmanuel Duplàa theoretically deconstructs the commonly attitudes toward ageing people as less involved with creative tasks. Methodologically, the authors proposed an innovative research design by combining two latest concepts of ageing and digital studies: narrative gerontology and digital storytelling. Thus the authors give voice to a new narrative where seniors are the creators of testimonies in the form of numbers (numeric narratives), exploring their creativity and sharing their creation with others.

As the traditional media content on ageing fostered a predominant image of the "hero of ageing" for people who age 50 and above, it is interesting to observe how social media visually represents the older adults. On this purpose, Ana Isabel Veloso, Sónia Ferreira, Liliana Vale Costa, Óscar Mealha and Carlos Santos documented how social online communities guide seniors to embrace an active ageing and social support in daily living. The corpus of their analysis consists in twenty-three papers published between 2015 and May 2020 in English-language peer-reviewed publications, which let the authors to set an inclusive model on how to better design a Senior Online Community, that is a three-stage

goal-oriented experience on how older adult interacted and engaged with the community and how they perceived a sense of belonging to it.

An interesting investigation of the commonly narratives of "old age" and of the role of ICTs in improving the life of seniors comes form Simone Carlo, and Maria Sourbati. In their article, the authors analyzed how digital inclusion policy documents – published in UK and Italy between 2009 and 2015 – framed the role of technologies in later life. The findings of their textual qualitative research on active ageing policy revealed that old age was advanced in lines with dominate narratives of old age as a period of frailty and decline, where seniors are unable to use the technology. Meanwhile, the ICTs were seen as "cyberspace utopia" (Feenberg, 1999) that could sustain the active ageing. Simone Carlo and Maria Sourbati systematically deconstruct the narrative on hero versus victims of ageing. The authors proposed the reconceptualization of social policy design as new age-friendly and inclusive media/technology that consider older people as an increasingly diverse group of technology users.

The study of Paula Alexandra Silva and Mario João Antunes queries a demanding contemporarily issue of the applied social research: how companies communicate online about their digital products designed to seniors and what are the features which recommends them as age-friendly? After examining the visual and the textual content of social media (120 posts, 120 text excerpts, 352 pictures, and 21 videos from Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn profiles), the authors advanced documented recommendations on how organizations could communicate in an inclusive, age-friendly, and gender-balanced way when targeting the silver audience.

The article of Ana Carla Amaro, Rui Rodrigues, Lídia Oliveira – *Engaging older adults in participatory and intergenerational design teams and processes: a systematic review of the current investigation* – is a useful conceptual and methodological framework on how to design a participatory action research in the ageing studies. The authors made a systematic review of the literature regarding the most used methodological approaches and participatory methods, along with the challenges in integrating older adults.

Further on, Ana Melro, Lídia Oliveira and Ana Carla Amaro, conducted a qualitative research to document the life of older people in rural communities of Portugal, Amiasis, where the population density is lower (15 permanent residence) and access to digital and technological means tends to be reduced. Their inquiries explore, predominantly, how are digital media used in Amiasis village by mature people (45 -90 year-old) and how they perceive technology and digital media and its role for daily practices. Most of the data are related to the first phase of an action-research project, *LOCUS – playfuL cOnneCted rUral territorieS*, which aim is to collect the stories and histories about people and the territory.

Anda Rožukalne approached the issue of ageing in the dynamic of post-Soviet societies. In her article, the analysis revolved on how the members of the three Soviet generations – the younger cohort (55-63), the "empty nest" and the "sandwich generation" (Friedman, Park, & Wiemers, 2017) (64-75) – perceived media literacy, skills and knowledge of media literacy, risk assessment, and other issues related to MIL (media and information literacy).

This special issue is timely, as the pandemic COVID-19 shows the importance of digital technologies for older people in critical times and how societies should create equal opportunities for the groups at risks of social exclusions and marginalization when it comes to technology infrastructure and basic skills.

Loredana IVAN
National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, European Network of Ageing Studies Chair

Alina DUDUCIUC
National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Health Communication TWG-ECREA