



THE NGO COMMITTEE ON AGEING BUILDING A SOCIETY FOR ALL AGES



Welcome to the September 2021 Issue of the UN NGO Committee on Ageing/NY Newsletter:

The UNIDOP October 1st Virtual Event and Digital Divide Issue

Dear Readers:

If you read no further, read this: The UN International Day of Older Persons (UNIDOP) will take place virtually on October 1, 2021. It is a worldwide celebration. Don't miss it! Please take a moment to register here today. [FREE Registration.](#)

The 31st UN International Day of Older Persons (UNIDOP) will be celebrated virtually and jointly by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) and the three NGO Committees on Ageing in New York, Geneva, and Vienna.

This year's UNIDOP topic: DIGITAL EQUITY FOR ALL AGES

In anticipation of UNIDOP, this newsletter issue focuses on various aspects of the Digital Divide, particularly the divide between generations and among and within nations. In this issue, the last in a series, Maud Bruce-About explores gaps in digital skills and the relevance of available content. She also tells us how ageism affects the usage of digital technology and how COVID-19 highlights technology's importance and limitations.

And, once again, in her informative and entertaining column on the Language of Age Equality, Adriane Berg gives us **Words Trending in Digital Literacy.**

UNIDOP-related Sessions to Attend:

- The NGO Committee on Ageing in **Vienna's** program addresses cyber security, especially for older persons. The virtual program will take place on October 1st from 7:30—9:15am EDT. [Learn more. FREE Registration](#)
- The NGO Committee on Ageing/**New York's** program provides a platform for a multistakeholder dialogue with a call to action. Speakers will address digital equity, including adequate policies, access, digital literacy, and safety. The virtual program will take place October 1st from 10:00—11:30am EDT. [Learn more. FREE Registration](#)
- **The International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics (IAGG)** will hold an event, "Digital Equity for All Ages: A Regional Perspective," with speakers from the five UN regions. It will take place on October 1st from 1:00—2:30pm EDT. [FREE Registration](#)

- The NGO Committee on Ageing in **Geneva** yesterday hosted a **pre-UNIDOP** event. The session included a presentation by Madame Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights. Panelists focused on age discrimination and digital equity as a human right. An invitation was sent out earlier to our readers.

These events are FREE but do require registration to join. Because they are scheduled at different times, you can attend as many as you wish.

(If other NGOs are planning side events, let us know, and we will post them on our website.)

TAKE A DEEPER DIVE

You may be wondering why International Days are so important. Here's why:

Official International Days raise awareness of the population or issue for whom the day is named. The UNIDOP elevates the importance of older persons, their contributions, needs, and rights on the world stage. Along with other UN Days, such as International Women's Day, World Children's Day, International Day of Persons with Disabilities, and World Refugee Day, it draws attention to populations whose issues deserve a global policy response. Governments, UN Offices, and NGOs at the national level often host special events on these days in their countries, amplifying the impact of the UN observance.

At last year's observance, Dr. Cynthia Stuen, Chair, NGO Committee on Ageing/NY, presented a [history of UNIDOP](#) from the General Assembly's 1990 designation of October 1st as the official day of observance up to the present.

We invite you to send us descriptions or photos of activities in your country in observance of UNIDOP. We'll share some of them in future newsletters.

But first, be sure to register now and join us for this informative and exciting discussion of Digital Equity for All Ages. [FREE Registration](#).

Yours,

Cynthia Stuen, Chair, NGO Committee on Ageing/NY

Martha Bial, Chair, Sub-committee on Communications, NGO Committee on Ageing/NY; Newsletter editor



MARK YOUR CALENDAR

September - World Alzheimer's Month The theme for the 2021 campaign is ***Know Dementia, Know Alzheimer's***, and it is all about the power of knowledge. Campaign resources for anyone wishing to support via social media or other means are available [here](#).

- The World Alzheimer Report, entitled the '*Journey through the diagnosis of dementia*', launches today on World Alzheimer's Day. Sign up [here](#).
- **September 29th, 9:00am GVA: Reducing Ageism: Synergies in Research and Policy.** Event by the Euro Ageism project. [Register here](#).
- **October 14th, 12:00-1:30pm EDT: Acting to Achieve a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons.** You are invited to attend webinar hosted by IFA. Registration is open to all, but the webinar is targeting the United States and Canada's advocacy efforts toward achieving a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons. Stay tuned for registration!



FEATURED ARTICLE: A Multidimensional Approach to Digital Literacy for Older Adults

By Maud Bruce-About, Executive Committee, NGO Committee on Ageing/NY

Background: This article on increasing the skills and motivation necessary for digital mastery by older adults is the third in a series on the Digital Divide, leading up to UNIDOP 2021. This year, the UNIDOP 2021 theme features "digitalization equity" for older persons, ensuring that

nobody is left behind in technology's essential need to have access and know-how.

Our first [article](#) laid bare the extent of the Digital Divide—the gap in digital use and access among elders compared to younger generations, older women as compared with men, and those of lower financial means compared with the more affluent.

Our [second](#) article explored several policies and initiatives to make internet connection technically feasible and affordable for older people.

This article explores motivational and accessibility aspects, like ease of use, skill levels, application relevance, and content geared toward older adults.

It is increasingly accepted that technology mastery starts with a positive attitude that requires meaningful access, sufficient speed, appropriate, affordable devices, and up-to-date skills. When these are available, there is a reinforcing, virtuous cycle, continuously generating successful digital use, which enhances the lives of elders.

However, even for those that are highly motivated and skilled in technology, as internet applications become more numerous and advanced, more digital skills become necessary.

Further, the more the internet and other digital technologies evolve, the more technology will be [used differently by different groups in society](#). This is partially linked to the structural usage divide. People of different social classes, ages, gender, ethnic and cultural origins increasingly use the internet differently and to varying degrees. Hence, policy to fight the Digital Divide must be multidimensional: technological, economic, educational, social, and motivational.

This multidimensional approach has worked where applied.

As for older persons, seen as "digital immigrants"—as opposed to the younger "digital natives" born after 1980 and raised in the digital era—the share of older persons using the internet is increasing even as the population ages and older persons adopt digital technologies. For instance, in 2007, 83% of people aged 65-74 in the [European community](#) had never used a computer, as opposed to [32%](#) in 2020.

To promote digital technology, the [European Commission's European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan of 2021](#) highlights basic and advanced digital skills as a precondition for participation in the labor market and society. The Commission sets a goal for 80% of 16- to 74-year-olds to have basic digital skills by 2030.

In the policy field—although many countries address infrastructure, access to devices, and offer life-long learning for mastery of digital skills—few strategies specifically focus on the needs of older persons.

A 2021 [UNECE](#) (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe) policy brief on [Ageing in the Digital Era](#) tries to improve this situation by identifying barriers to adoption, recommending strategies, and providing best practices.

As for barriers to the adoption of digital technology, UNECE identifies:

- a lack of skills and experience;
- a lack of self-confidence;

- a lack of motivation/interest;
- a lack of relevance;
- inaccessible design;
- and physical or cognitive impairment late in life.



It is essential to recognize that socioeconomic, educational, and professional backgrounds influence digital use later in life.

Older persons with lower educational levels and less demanding digitalized working lives are disadvantaged in their competency, familiarity, and access.

To include and empower the ageing population, UNECE makes four policy recommendations that we will now explore with reference to the [UNECE policy briefing](#) site and other sources.

1. "Ensure equal access to goods and services involving digital technology through participatory design and policy initiatives that render online services such as e-Government, e-banking, e-commerce, e-learning and tele-health services available, accessible, affordable, and user-friendly, while maintaining continued off-line access."

Information, everyday services, and interaction with public authorities increasingly go online. However, on average, less than one out of three older persons in the EU uses this option.

This can be attributed partly to access—COVID-19 has especially revealed lack of access in care homes and institutions—and affordability. Still, digital technology also needs to be age-friendly and adapted to users' diverse and specific needs.

Hence, there is a need and opportunity for older consumers to give input and co-design tech devices and programs to integrate real, rather than perceived, needs in goods and services. Initiatives addressing the "Age Tech" market tailor programs to support the use of those services most required by elders, such as e-banking and e-government. For instance, the Serbian Red Cross has developed a step-by-step guide for some e-Government services and provides coaching for older adults as part of its "[Stronger and Connected](#)" project.

COVID-19 has both showed the advantages and the limits of digitalization for elders.

Sweden is a case in point. In a highly digitalized country like Sweden, although COVID-19 increased the use of social media, e-commerce, e-communication, and telehealth among the elderly, authorities soon realized that the [online vaccination booking system had to be complemented](#) by phone or even physical drop-in. Many older persons lacked the skills or the necessary digital identification issued mainly by banks on smartphones.

As for sources of information on COVID-19, it is vital to note that [older persons in Sweden, despite increased use of digital sources, still rely on traditional media](#) to a more considerable, more significant extent than the rest of the population: Television (90% as opposed to 61% for total population); Radio (26% as opposed to 16%), Paper and Digital Newspapers (25% as opposed to 10%). Websites of authorities skewed the opposite, with 9% of elders using these sites to get COVID-19 information compared to 23% of the general surveyed population.

And we must acknowledge a hidden issue, the language divide:

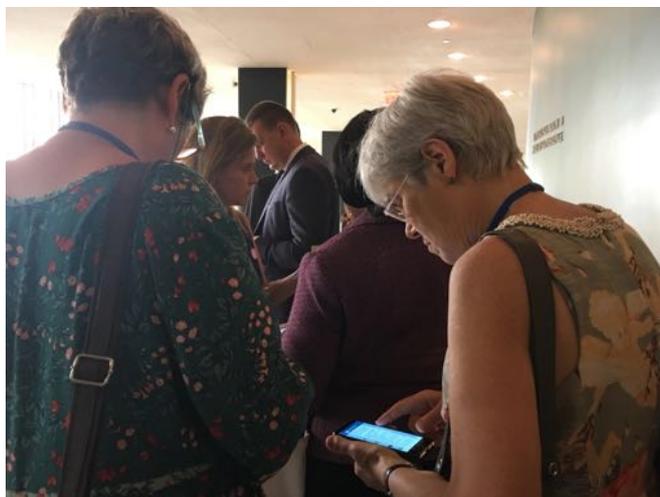
Online content must be perceived as relevant and accessible in native or at least understood language to motivate online activity.

According to the [World Wide Web Foundation](#), ONLY about 5% of households speak English at home worldwide, but around 50% of internet copy is in English.

2. "[Enhance digital literacy](#) to reduce the digital skills gap by providing training to safely and securely navigate digital environments, including intergenerational peer learning opportunities, as well as measures that tackle ageism, to encourage engagement among older persons."

It is increasingly realized that a life-course approach is necessary to learn, maintain and evolve the digital literacy skills needed for personal and professional growth throughout the life continuum.

It is also being realized (too slowly) that emotional and cognitive development is possible throughout life by rightly matching individual learning needs. A [project in the Slovak Republic](#) will analyze, test, and increase digital skills in 2023-2026 to provide free basic digital skills training to 9,000 older persons.



Stereotypical ageism or prejudice about the willingness and capacity to use digital technology often leads to internalized age stereotypes, insecurities, and outright fears of using technology.

By the positive representation of older persons as competent users, the media can combat ageism. Like the cartoon competition of the German National Association of Senior Citizen Organizations, awareness-raising campaigns can change social perceptions.

During COVID-19—especially at its onset—social media spread ageist messages, culminating in the now-infamous "[#BoomerRemover](#)" and "[OK Boomer](#)." Research indicates that the prevalence of ageism in social media partially mirrors the perception of older persons in society.

Compounding the negative stereotypes is the fact that older persons are less represented on social media. In the US, only [7% of Twitter users are 65 or above](#), and therefore contribute less content. For social media to be more inclusive and less ageist, older persons need to raise their voices and contribute through self-representation.

Today, many older influencers on Instagram, Facebook, and Youtube—like [@iconaccidental](#), [@baddiewinkle](#), and [@byladysilver](#) (only to mention a few)—use social media to voice essential issues; influence politics; promote a market for age-friendly goods and services; and encourage others to lead healthy lifestyles. (Allers No38, 2019)

For greater technology adoption by elders, intergenerational mentoring has proven effective to combat ageism by changing perceptions and dissipating intergenerational tension.

The Truth Gap

A new element is causing a further barrier to motivation in learning technology by elders: They often do not trust internet information. During the pandemic, it has become [more difficult for internet users to evaluate the integrity of internet content](#). For instance, 51% of internet users in Sweden felt they had the ability to evaluate online information at the end of 2020 instead of 56% in 2019. Only 27% of the older population in Sweden feel they have the capacity to distinguish online truth from falsity.

3. "[Leverage the potential of digital technologies for active and healthy ageing, well-being and empowerment of older persons including digital communication that can reduce loneliness and social isolation, and digital technologies that can foster opportunities for independent living in old age.](#)"

The UNECE policy brief points out that digital communication and technology facilitate contact with family and friends and reduce social isolation and loneliness. Digital communication has proven especially useful—given physical distancing and confinement rules—during the present pandemic.

Many projects to support social interaction and well-being are underway, such as [training on tablets in Malta's](#) residential and community care homes, and basic e-banking and an online library for the visually impaired in Azerbaijan. Other projects, like [GensConnect](#), based in New York, reduce loneliness and allow connection across generations.

Assistive technology and devices, from health information and services to motion systems and sensors, can also help older persons manage their health and maintain their independence at home. In Ireland, the [BConnect services of ALONE](#) tailor solutions. In Italy and many other countries, telemedicine enables health services remotely.

4. "Ensure the protection of human rights of older persons in the digital era by creating ethical, transparent and safe digital environments and services through policies that protect dignity, autonomy, privacy as well as free and informed consent to the use of digital technology."

While stating the benefits of digital technology for active and healthy ageing, UNECE warns of the risk for "unethical use and human rights violations" and asserts that digital and assistive technology "should never lead to disempowering practices" or "fostering and maintaining a culture of dependency."

UNECE also underscores the right to privacy and asserts that elders need to "understand the extent of monitoring, data processing, gathering purpose, data storage, and data sharing, if data is being collected whilst they use assistive technology and robotics."

UNECE recommends targeted training to allow older persons and caregivers to understand the benefits and risks of technology use.

In Germany, the [German National Association of Senior Citizens Organisations](#) provides 16 internet experience locations to demonstrate and show the benefits and risks of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in care.

To summarize, motivation is vital to the voluntary use of digital technology and, therefore, digital equity. Technology for better healthcare and ease of long-distance relationship maintenance for the older adult population can solve problems. But lack of skills, access, and understanding can also cause them.

A full spectrum approach is needed. This will emerge in tandem with a growing respect for the rights of seniors, potential for contribution, and learning skills of the older adult. Progress in digital equity goes hand in hand with an anti-ageist, pro-senior societal culture.

The Language of Age Equality: Words that Are Trending

Digital Literacy

Adriane Berg, Sub-committee on Communications, NGO Committee on Ageing/NY

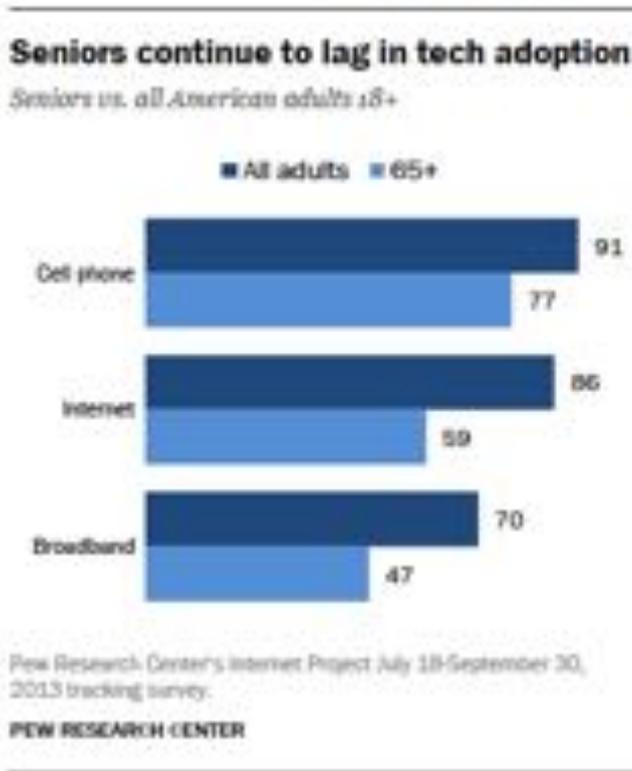
Digital Literacy is competence in using technology and digital

devices to inform, be informed, and communicate. Digital Literacy requires that one has the skills to understand and use cell phones and computers for all their traditional purposes. That includes finding and reading the news and other written material, posting information, reaching others through email and texting, transacting business through online shopping or banking, and conducting online visits with doctors, other professionals, family, and friends.

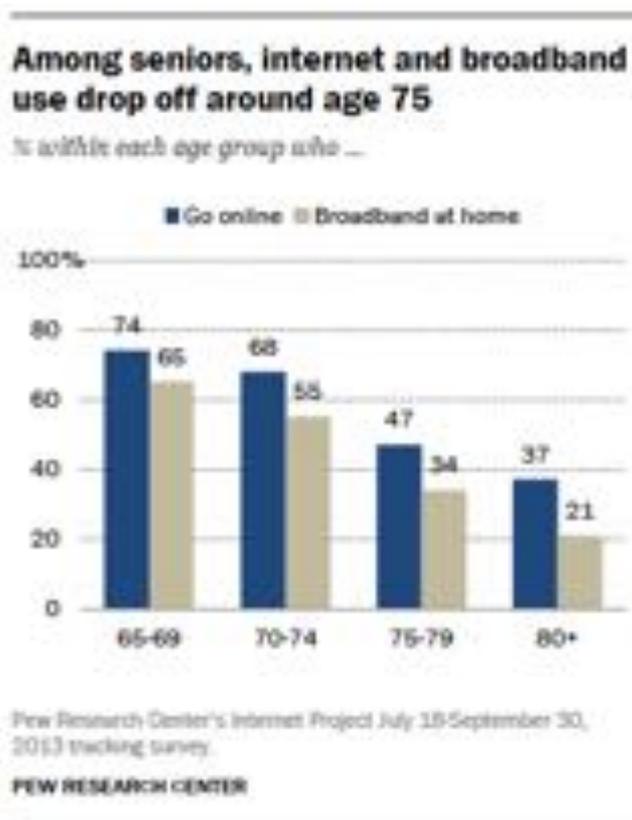


Unfortunately, older adults are statistically behind the younger population in Digital Literacy. According to Pew Research, seniors lag in the adoption of the three basic Digital Technologies: Cell Phones, the Internet, and Broadband.

"Digital inclusion remains a significant issue amongst older people...55% of over-65s lack at least one essential digital skill, and 53% of over-65s have none of the foundational digital skills they need," according to the [Good Things Foundation](#).

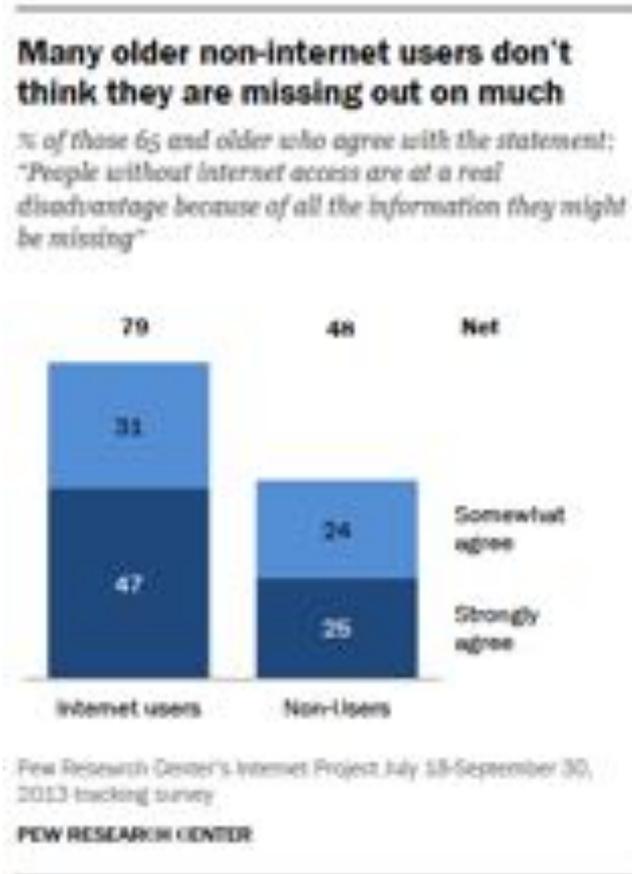


Those over the age of 75 fall back the furthest.



The causes for this lag include:

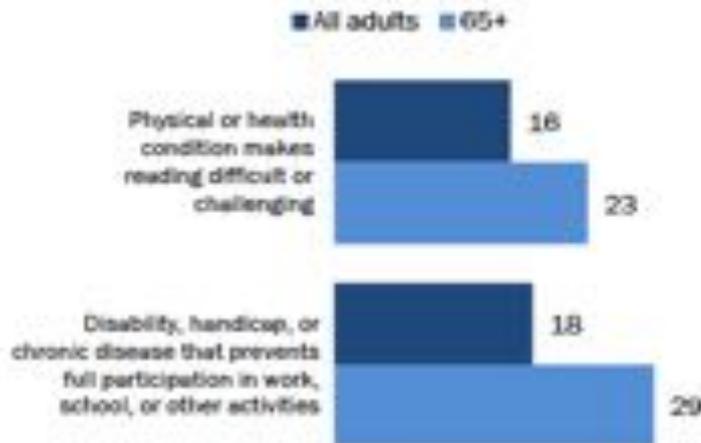
- A lack of interest in technology. Tech concepts seem foreign and mysterious.
- A lack of need. Not seeing benefits and usefulness.
- An underlying fear of technology.
- Embarrassment in lack of skills.
- Belief they cannot learn. A fear of "breaking" the device by improper use.
- Lack of access and high cost. [See NGO Newsletter #2](#) for full coverage



Finally, some older adults suffer from conditions that prevent them from easy use of digital devices.

Older adults more likely to have physical or health conditions that make tech use challenging

% of adults in each age group who have ...



Pew Research Center's Internet Project July 15-September 30, 2013 tracking survey

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Nevertheless, the benefits of **Digital Technology** are so substantial that literacy among older populations is increasing.

Benefits motivating Digital Literacy include:

Social Enhancement

For older adults in particular, the risks associated with social isolation are profound. Loneliness among older adults has been associated with depression, cardiovascular disease, functional decline, and even death.

Dr. Nir Barzilai, Director of the Aging Research Institute at Albert Einstein University and author of [Age Later](#), reports that one person in his Centenarian Study of people genetically disposed to live past 100 died during COVID-19. That person stopped eating because of the isolation the pandemic brought to her life.

Better Healthcare

For older people seeking to control their healthcare and support needs, connecting online for doctors' visits can be especially valuable. So too, for exercise programs and nutritional guidance. So pervasive has the delivery of healthcare through technology become that Digital Health is now a trending word. Improving digital skills and confidence among older people remains vital to delivering healthcare to those with a low household income, those living in social housing, and those with lower educational attainment.

Technology Aimed at Increasing Digital Literacy for Elders

Tech companies over the past several years have started to see the advantages of designing devices aimed at seniors, primarily to stay connected with loved ones. These advancements include designing for users with low vision, remote computing where caregivers can work on the computer for elders, specialized computers with face recognition, and pre-programmed content.

Groups like [Senior Net](#) and [Oasis](#) and most senior centers offer classes in Digital Literacy. And as boomers become seniors, their greater familiarity obviates some of the disappointing statistics on elder Digital Literacy.

Finally, it must be remembered that digital knowledge becomes obsolete in under five years for everyone regardless of age.

For true age equity in a digital world, the objective must be more than current literacy but teaching elders to nimbly keep up with changes and update skills. Each day the definition of Digital Literacy expands to new frontiers and new technologies for us all.

And don't forget to sign up for UNIDOP [here!](#)

Thank you for reading this issue of our newsletter. We welcome any feedback! Feel free to drop us a line [here.](#)

To discover more about how you can be part of the dialogue and the solutions, visit ngocoa-ny.org/participate

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