

Europeans Fit for the Digital Age

Introducing the EU Digital Citizenship Working Group

October 2022



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Foreword

The digital transformation of our world has been nothing short of extraordinary. Just two short generations ago, computers, smartphones, wearable devices and other digital technologies were seen as science fiction. Now, it is impossible to imagine our lives without them.

But although digital technologies are everywhere, not everyone can use them competently, meaningfully and safely. The potential of digital progress is inarguable. But so is the fact that people are left behind across the European Union, as elsewhere, and there are huge gaps both in terms of access to digital technologies but also in the skills and readiness of citizens to take full advantage of them.

As Europe embarks on its digital transition, we must ensure that everyone can connect. We need digital citizenship for all. We need to give people the training and tools to safely and responsibly access digital technologies – and be part of the online community, if they want to.

The EU Digital Citizenship Working Group launched in December 2020 to contribute multidisciplinary expertise from civil society and industry to the current EU debate on digital citizenship.

This paper introduces our Group, its members, and a conception of digital citizenship across five pillars: digital foundations, digital wellness, digital engagement and media literacy, digital empowerment and digital opportunities. Each pillar presents unique challenges, including digital inequalities across Europe, fragmented initiatives, the lack of multilevel discussion, balancing privacy and safety, the slow(er) pace of the regulatory framework compared to tech development, and lacking trust in private and public sectors. One point is clear: fostering digital citizenship is an all-of-society responsibility and we all have a role to play.

The EU Digital Citizenship Working Group looks forward to following this advice and providing space for policymakers, academia, civil society and companies to work together and with citizens.

About the EU Digital Citizenship Working Group

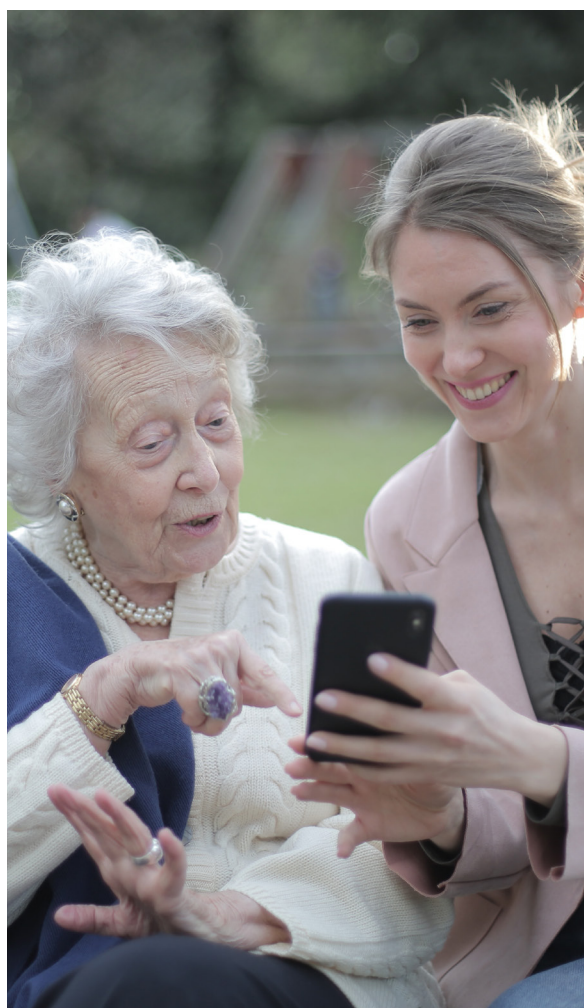
The EU Digital Citizenship Working Group was launched in December 2020 to convene and contribute multidisciplinary expertise to the current EU debate on digital citizenship¹. Working Group members include EU civil society organisations, European academics, industry and think tank representatives. In the Group's first year of operations, Members held a workshop series to exchange best practice and knowledge from their experience and areas of expertise. This paper shares a summary of the results of these workshops.

The Group believes that digital citizenship encompasses the fundamental technical and cognitive capabilities for meaningful, safe, and responsible participation in today's digital economy and society. Digital citizenship informs how we navigate privileges and obligations in digital spaces and provides access to the social and economic value of digitalisation.

To uphold democracy and build a resilient, respectful and safe digital society, we must support a holistic concept of digital citizenship.

The Group aims to lead a multidisciplinary reflection on how best to foster digital citizenship to permit all Europeans to fully reap the benefits of digitalisation and digital society.

This paper introduces the EU Digital Citizenship Working Group to the EU policy community of which it is part, and the work undertaken during its inaugural year. Both show how digital citizenship can be an instrumental part of overcoming some of the challenges democracies face, and in building a resilient, respectful and safe digital society for all.



¹ The European Commission launched its 'Digital Decade' proposal in March 2021 setting key targets for the EU's digital transition. A vital element of the vision for a Digital Decade is the principle of digital citizenship, and in January 2022, the Commission proposed an inter-institutional solemn declaration on digital rights and principles: https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/europes-digital-decade-digital-targets-2030_en

Membership

The membership includes academics, researchers, industry representatives and civil society organisations with wide-ranging expertise across their respective areas.

Interested parties are welcome to address inquiries to the Group Steering Committee. Our door is always open: EUDigCitWG@fourtold.eu

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What Is Digital Citizenship?

There are many reputable schools of thought on digital citizenship and what it entails. Our Group follows in the footsteps of established scholars and experts on the topic² who note digital citizenship involves not only digital and media literacy, but also other skills that appear in related discussions of participation, democracy, social engagement and human rights.

The Group takes inspiration from several of these and organises its thinking about digital citizenship around five primary pillars , detailed in the infographic below.

1	Digital Foundations: Ensuring people have the foundational skills needed to navigate the digital world; digital literacy, digital skills and digital competencies.
2	Digital Wellbeing: The Group takes inspiration from several of these and organises its thinking about digital citizenship around five primary pillars detailed in the infographic below.
3	Digital Engagement: Empowering people to engage responsibly with the digital world, including around issues such as disinformation, values and trust.
4	Digital Empowerment: Strengthening individuals and Groups who want to create positive change using digital tools and spaces.
5	Digital Opportunities: Creating opportunities by preparing or reskilling populations through professional digital skills, digital soft skills, and digital competencies.

² inter alia: Harvard Berkman Klein Center for Youth and Media (cf Understanding skills for the Digital World, 2020), the 2016 UNESCO definition, the ISTE definition (2020, US-focused), the Australian e-Safety Commissioner, the DQ Global Standards Competency (2020), the Council of Europe Digital Citizenship Overview, Ribble (2016 - 2020).

Digital citizenship in the European Union

Situation in the European Union

Across the aforementioned five pillars of digital citizenship, the situation in the European Union (EU) differs greatly between countries and regions.

Many individuals and organisations are working to foster digital citizenship at national, local and regional levels for internet users of all ages. National governments and the EU Institutions have also worked to address deficits in connectivity, digital skills, and digital safety. However, the pace of technological advancement can make it difficult for regulators and above all citizens to keep up.

In January 2022, the European Commission proposed an inter-institutional declaration on digital rights and principles to complement existing rights, such as those in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, and data protection and privacy legislation. These rights and principles include supporting solidarity and inclusion; fostering participation in the digital public space; and increasing safety, security, and empowerment of individuals. They reflect the value that the Commission places in ensuring citizens take control of their digital future, and that no person, Group or region is left behind in the digital transition.

Main challenges to digital citizenship in the EU

The workshop series undertaken by the EU Digital Citizenship Working Group identified the following challenges to achieving holistic digital citizenship. This list is by no means empirical, new, or exhaustive, but bears reiterating before the possible solutions put forward by the Group are outlined.

- **Digital inequalities:** a significant part of the population does not have access to digital devices, internet connection, nor the skills to navigate the digital world. For an overview of how these inequalities manifest in European societies. Please see infographic 2 below.
- **Poor citizenship education:** education on how to engage with greater society – socially, democratically, civically and economically – is often lacking.
- **Inadequate outreach:** the solutions and opportunities related to growing digital citizenship that are available often do not reach their target audiences.
- **Insufficient public debate:** regulators, academia, industry and civil society do not always engage in a constructive dialogue to provide relevant and actionable solutions.
- **Online-offline separation:** many interventions address the online and offline dimensions of digital citizenship separately. This can render these interventions less effective.
- **Agency vs. protection:** striking the right balance between granting users the agency to engage online on their own terms and measures to protect them and/or their privacy is extremely challenging.
- **Fragmentation:** Without a pan-EU vision for achieving digital citizenship, a systemic level approach is difficult.
- **Disinterest:** Many people do not understand why they should care about their digital habits and the threats or opportunities therein, or do not believe digital citizenship education applies to them, such that they disregard this type of outreach.

- **Slow regulatory framework:** the regulatory framework cannot keep up with the technology. This creates mistrust in the tools and can lead to their abuse.
- **Trust in the private sector:** online platforms are treated like public spaces but are offered by private companies. More transparency about and harmonisation of these companies' efforts to enhance digital citizenship on their services is needed.

Who is left behind

The EU Digital Citizenship Working Group examined the problem of digital inequalities and reached the following conclusions that can exacerbate these inequalities and make certain populations and/or individuals more vulnerable:



Economic status/class:

often a determining factor in an individual's access to digital

skills and technologies - i.e., those from lower-income households are less likely to have access to computers or the internet. Moreover, individuals with higher socio-economic status benefit more from their engagement with digital technologies than their low SES counterparts.



Place of residence:

those living in rural and remote areas may find it more difficult to access the internet.



Cultural background:

individuals with a cultural background that differs from the dominant

culture in their area of residence may encounter additional barriers to accessing digital citizenship resources – for example, those who speak a different language



Age:

age can be a factor in determining the ease with which an individual

might access resources relating to digital citizenship. However, it is important not to mistake children or young people for 'digital natives' who also require comprehensive support in navigating the online world safely.



Gender:

women and the LGBTQ+ community are exposed to additional risks online, such as online misogyny and gender-based violence.



Apathy:

individuals uninterested in collecting information in the digital world or otherwise, or feel they have no voice in doing so.

The way forward: pillar by pillar

In this section, we describe the “pillars” of digital citizenship in depth, as well as propose some possible solutions put forward by the EU Digital Citizenship Working Group during their first-year workshop series.

Throughout, the “Member Spotlights” (see boxes) provide examples of some of our members’ efforts to foster digital citizenship in the EU.

Digital Foundations

The COVID-19 pandemic forced the world online. It brought alternative learning solutions and flexible workplaces, but also revealed a digital divide both in terms of access and skills across society.

The digital foundations pillar refers to more traditional digital literacy, the skills people need to stay safe, protect and control personal information and access information. These foundational skills are lacking at an EU level. At the EU level, the Digital Education Action Plan for 2021-2027⁴ provides the framework for creating an integrated approach to the use of technology in education, and for improving digital skills outside of formal education pathways. This is a good start to addressing the inequalities and barriers faced by individuals in learning digital skills and competencies, and allows for a more holistic

approach to building digital foundations across the EU. However, the skills acquired should be for life as opposed to work or school alone and should not be limited to formal education.

Group Members noted a disconnect between government and civil society initiatives to build digital foundations and encouraged more inclusion of civil society and individuals themselves in the decision- and policy-making. They also encouraged more localised solutions that avoid top-down, one-size-fits-all solutions that ultimately are not the right fit for anyone. They also recommended establishing a way to certify skills acquired through non-formal education and training, and for a best-practice exchange to help new initiatives benefit from lessons learned.

SPOTLIGHT BY AGE PLATFORM EUROPE

FAITH Project - Feeling Safe to Transact Online in the third age

FAITH aims to combat digital marginalisation amongst adults over the age of 55 by improving their ICT skills so they build their confidence and their abilities to use the internet and digital technologies.

<https://faith-project.eu/>



⁴ Digital Education Action Plan for 2021-2027 (European Commission): <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan#:~:text=The%20Digital%20Education%20Action%20Plan%20%282021-2027%29%20is%20a,systems%20of%20Member%20States%20to%20the%20digital%20age.>

SPOTLIGHT BY SOUK**The Youth Policy Development Group**

Shout Out UK (SOUK) teamed up with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to convene a Youth Policy Development Group (YPDG) to represent young people in England to politicians at the highest levels of government, and so mainstream youth voices across all national decisions.

www.shoutoutuk.org/ypdg-with-dcms/



Digital Wellbeing

The concept of digital wellbeing refers to skills needed to promote health, well-being and resilience of internet users and to help them build healthy online relationships with other internet users and, importantly, with the online services they use. This includes awareness of the impact their behaviour online has on others to equip users to handle different online encounters to ensure a positive experience for all.

The EU is ahead of the curve in its attempts to examine this issue at a policy level and there is a growing awareness of digital wellness, particularly in the context of remote or virtual work since the pandemic.

Still, more clarity and consensus are needed on the concepts of digital well-being and digital rights. The Group recommends more investment in research on user needs, experiences and preferences, and people's relationships with digital platforms and applications. This will require closer collaboration between researchers, internet service providers, and regulators.

Both non-formal and formal models of user education are also key in creating learner-centred approaches to raise awareness of the importance of digital well-being. The processes and models should involve citizens, governments, technology companies, education providers, the media, civil society organisations, and grassroots Groups.

Questions of what a good work-life balance looks like, and discussion about the 'right to disconnect' or having a more meaningful digital experience in a work context gained traction. The Group feels the same discussion needs to happen beyond the workplace.

SPOTLIGHT BY UNIVERSITY OF BOLOGNA with COUNCIL OF EUROPE

The Video Game Culture initiative

The Video Game Culture (VGC) initiative promoted by the Council of Europe's Digital Citizenship Education project aims to raise the awareness about the necessity to promote a pedagogical reflection around video games. Video games can be cultural tools, able to offer many incentives not only to having fun, but also to thought, learning and development of the person. It is important to consider video games as worthy of study and to compile an accurate and careful analysis of their characteristics, mechanics, and languages.

<https://rm.coe.int/educating-for-a-video-game-culture-a-map-for-teachers-and-parents/1680a28f24>

SPOTLIGHT BY META

Get Digital

Get Digital is Meta's signature digital citizenship and wellbeing programme. It is a free collection of lesson plans, conversation starters, activities, videos and other resources for young people, parents and educators. Get Digital's curriculum was developed with expert and is available in many languages. It aims to help young people develop into informed, competent and responsible digital citizens who creatively, compassionately and safely use, control and build technology to improve individual and community prosperity and wellbeing.

<https://www.facebook.com/fbgetdigital>



SPOTLIGHT BY EUROPEAN SCHOOLNET

Better Internet for Kids

European Schoolnet is running the "Better Internet for Kids" initiative on behalf of the European Commission. This line of work includes the coordination of a European network of Safer Internet Centres, which work together across and beyond EU Member States to foster children and young people's well-being online, by raising awareness and understanding of online safety issues, providing helpline counselling and support, and making it possible for citizens to report illegal content anonymously.

<https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/>

<https://www.saferinternetday.org/>



Digital Engagement and Media Literacy

This pillar focuses on the skills required to evaluate, create and share media content to access and exchange accurate information, as well as how to respond and engage respectfully online.

Though disinformation (organised and intentional false information) represents a major problem for online society, in many ways misinformation is equally complex for users to recognise and for policymakers, educators and companies to address.

A lack of media literacy skills is not the only barrier in this area. Prevalent mistrust and divergent values across society can also pose challenges⁶. We need to balance the right to free speech against the threat of misinformation: this will require partnerships between regulators and digital platforms and the inclusion of such skills into school curricula and informal education settings.



Media literacy should become part of curricula in schools and universities to empower citizens to safely and productively navigate the digital world.

The Group felt a common European vision for fostering digital and media literacy at scale, with agreed-upon definitions of relevant concepts and a consensus on guiding principles could help this situation.

Harmonised EU regulation for illegal and harmful content like the recent Digital Services Act⁷ could provide clarity on the subject, however additional mechanisms need to be set up to address content moderation issues more broadly. The Group also recommended online platforms seek more input from civil society experts when developing proactive solutions to improve media literacy and counter misinformation and disinformation.

⁶ Media Literacy (European Commission): <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/media-literacy>

⁷ The Digital Services Act: ensuring a safe and accountable online environment (European Commission): https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-services-act-ensuring-safe-and-accountable-online-environment_en

SPOTLIGHT BY AGE PLATFORM EUROPE DIGITOL Project

The DIGITOL project aims to combat hate speech and misinformation by developing digital literacy and promoting EU common values amongst older Europeans. The partners involved in the project have developed the Digitol Academy, an e-Learning platform based on innovative intergenerational educational practices to engage older adults in non-formal education.

<https://digitol.eu/>



SPOTLIGHT BY EUROPEAN SCHOOLNET Schools Tackling Disinformation

Together with Mediawijs, FaktaBaari EDU and the Maltese Ministry for Education, European Schoolnet developed the Facts4All Massive Open Online Course (MOOC): Schools Tackling Disinformation. This online course aims to empower primary and secondary teachers – and other education professionals – to develop and implement effective whole-school approaches to foster critical thinking and tackle online disinformation through intergenerational collaboration and community engagement.

<https://fcl.eun.org/facts4all/>



Digital Empowerment

Digital empowerment describes the ability to harness the power of technology and the internet for positive change. This could be to generate interest and conversation, to raise awareness and participation in social movements, civic engagement and democracy or to inform people of the process and outcomes of different actions.

Challenges here include apathy, the complexity of global challenges and the inconclusive impact of digitalisation on democracy and democratic processes. There is also uncertainty as to which digital platforms and tools are most appropriate for activism, and finally but importantly the underfunding of the NGOs and civil society organisations working in this area.

A holistic definition of digital citizenship beyond skills and extending to the fullness of the online experience, including political engagement and activism, would be helpful here. It is also important to consider how a variety of digital spaces could engage people towards enhanced or reduced political behaviour.

Another aspect to consider is the individual disposition to “empowerment”. Some citizens may not be interested in gathering more information, whereas others will express opinions without spending much time to form them. Others still are reflective and engaged when informed and motivated or can delegate that action onwards.

The solutions for enabling digital empowerment must account for these differences in character. Governments should take care to provide avenues for digital democracy and account for digital participation in their processes. Solutions should also be participatory and user-centric, and devised in consultation with citizens and civil society organisations. Strategies to mitigate polarisation online and off should be supported by policymakers and internet service providers. Internet service providers are called on to diversify content people see and to provide more information on ranking systems. Online platforms could also develop tools that cater to socially engaged people and organisations.

SPOTLIGHT BY SHOUT OUT UK

London Voter Registration Week 2020 with the Greater London Authority

Shout Out UK (SOUK) and the GLA ran a city-wide online campaign in September 2020 to address voter registration inequality in London. Backed by all of London's boroughs, the London Voter Registration Strategic Partnership and over 100 civil society organisations, LVRW 2020 reached 2.6 million people online. It boosted youth voter registration by 23% across the capital – despite the pandemic lockdown.

www.shoutoutuk.org/portfolio/london-voter-registration-week-2020/



SPOTLIGHT BY COFACE

DigiGen

COFACE Families Europe is partner to DigiGen, EU funded research project on the impacts of technological transformation on children and young people's everyday lives. DigiGen builds on COFACE's approach to harnessing the full potential of technology for families as laid out in our Digitalisation Principles. In DigiGen's study of civic participation, our findings highlight the limitations of current policy approaches to digital citizenship and in turn advocates for a more holistic approach. This approach puts emphasis on supporting children and young people's civic engagement, political participation, and expression of personal political agency.

<https://www.digigen.eu>



Digital Opportunities

This final pillar refers to the need for digital citizenship across the economic sectors. It refers to professional training as well as upskilling and reskilling. The Group emphasised the importance of distinguishing between three different types of digital skills: professional digital skills, professional digital soft skills, and digital competencies.

The EU and its member states are not currently on track to hit their targets of having enough workers with digital skills to remain competitive with the rest of the world⁸. Unfortunately, there is no indication that this situation will quickly improve in the future.

In many cases, the biggest challenges to providing people with the skills needed to take advantage of the EU's digital opportunities are the lack of flexibility and coordination in education systems across the Union. Formal education across most

member states is not providing these skills, and NGOs active in the sector are often underfunded. The situation could also be improved were there to be more cooperation between governments and private companies to create job opportunities and place individuals trained for digital careers.

The Group also believes we should take a more holistic approach when building a framework to improve digital skills, focusing not just on economic growth, but also accounting for other factors where digital opportunities might have a positive impact. The solutions to these problems should come from public authorities and be planned and delivered cohesively at an EU level. Civil society should form a core part of the solution, with stakeholders identified and engaged at every stage of the strategy.

SPOTLIGHT BY MOLENGEEK Unactivated Talent

MolenGeek's mission is to recognise and activate talents overlooked by traditional education and career systems. Hassan, a 38-year-old bus driver in Brussels, felt frustrated with his career. After enrolling with MolenGeek, he discovered a tech ecosystem, and this opened up a world of opportunity. Today he works for SalesForce in Dublin. It doesn't matter if you are a bus driver or a salesman. What matters is an equal distribution of opportunities.

<https://molengeek.com/>



⁸ The great divide Digitalisation and digital skill gaps in the EU workforce (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training): https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/esj_insight_9_digital_skills_final.pdf#:~:text=The%20majority%20%2852%25%29%20of%20adult%20EU%20employees%20stated,do%20not%20need%20any%20ICT%20skills%20at%20all

Conclusion

Our society is increasingly and irrevocably online. Digitalisation is changing our social, professional and political worlds. We must reteach and rethink both our societies, our economies and our regulatory frameworks to ensure no one is left behind. Everyone in Europe should be fit for the digital world.

The “five pillars” are just one way to understand the broader opportunities and the many avenues for people to safely and meaningfully take part in today’s digitalised world. It is a challenge to foster holistic digital citizenship founded on the principles of safety, transparency and even accessibility. It is also a call to action for

policymakers, civil society, and companies. The EU Digital Citizenship Working Group looks forward to contributing to the conversation on how to coordinate these collaborations and raise the profile of solutions at all levels that are making headway.

The Group is currently developing a dashboard of best practice initiatives across the pillars, across geographies, across demographics and across disciplines aimed at growing digital citizenship in the EU. The Group looks forward to sharing and discussing these results with the larger community working on these topics.

Get in touch

The EU Digital Citizenship Working Group is led by its rotating Steering Committee and can be contacted at **EUDigCitWG@fourtold.eu**. There are opportunities for membership and observer membership. We look forward to hearing from you.



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