

## **MINDING THE GAP: BUILDING BRIDGES THROUGH INTERGENERATIONAL MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY**

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### **Abstract**

This chapter delves into the relevance and richness of intergenerational media education, shedding light on its role in bridging generational divides and fostering a conscientious use of digital devices and technologies. Drawing from previous research experience, we reflect upon the pivotal factors of access, knowledge, competencies, connections, interests, and motivations in moulding the landscape of media and information literacy (MIL). Taking these conditions into account and exploring the impact of each one in digital media usage and literacy's generational gaps can point a picture of how to promote intergenerationality and collectively and collaboratively develop MIL competences. Ultimately, this reflective analysis underscores the urgency of understanding these aspects for the effective implementation of intergenerational media education, charting a course towards an all-encompassing, well-informed, and harmonious digital landscape.

**Keywords:** Intergenerational Media Education; Generational Divides; Digital Media; Media and Information Literacy; Digital Landscape.

Martha was a proud grandmother of a 10-year-old child - Lucie. They had been building a good relationship, and even though they didn't spend as much time together as they both wished, they learned how to make the most of it. They shared a common passion for designing cloths and painting colouring books. They also enjoyed reading and playing in the park. But as time went by, Lucie gradually became interested in other types of play – digital media caught her eye and had become a major focus of interest. Martha tried to keep up with her granddaughter. She bought a smartphone and a tablet and hoped for the best! But she struggled. Nor she knew what kind of online content Lucie appreciated, nor she knew how to make it available for her – no buttons do not always mean more accessible or easier to use. She also found it difficult to ensure that she was appropriately using the devices and providing suitable, educational, and entertaining content for Lucie. “How difficult can it be to keep up with them, kids?”, she wondered as she slowly felt Lucie further away, raising barriers that prevented them from interacting, playing and even communicating.

To make matters even more difficult, Martha's husband - Mike - was afraid to use digital tools. Although he had worked with computers for a large part of his life, he had allowed himself to grow old in constant fear of doing something wrong, of letting a virus strike his equipment or of giving away personal information without realizing it. The millennium bug (National Geographic, n.d) was something that had a huge impact on him – by that time, he had a responsible job where any software or electrical failure could put the lives of dozens of people at risk.

Though this could be the beginning of a short tale, it is the portrayal of hundreds of families. Data has been showing that even though the digital gap has been fading (Bolin & Skogerbø, 2013), there are still generational differences between younger and older generations. Older individuals tend to share more disinformation-related content (Guess, Nagler & Tucker, 2019) and interventions that aim to promote their media and information literacy (MIL) competencies frequently pay less attention to understanding and creating media content (Rasi & Rivinen, 2020). Furthermore, and although the pandemic has forced many people into digital communication dynamics – mainly for staying in contact with others -, it has further accentuated existing disparities (Pérez-Escolar & Canet, 2022). But how can we take advantage of the generational gap to promote digital empowerment and enhance MIL?

## What's this gap thing?

In today's interconnected world, the internet and digital media have become essential for numerous activities. From education and work to entertainment and civic engagement, new digital practices and dynamics are now an intrinsic part of our routines. Though, a significant number of individuals are confronted with barriers that prevent them from fully embracing the advantages of the digital era. Limited internet access, insufficient technological know-how, lack of access to devices, and socio-economic inequalities are some of the factors that contribute to this challenge. All in all, the term 'digital gap' denotes the various inequalities that arise between those who have access and the necessary skills to use digital technology and those who do not. And let's make no mistake - this is not just a problem for older generations. Massimo Ragnedda & Muschert (2017) warn of the problem and urgency of a new theoretical lens to interpret and deal with digital inequalities. The researchers underpin a three-level approach. First, and at a basic level, citizens need to have access to the Internet; then, they need a specific set of technical, social, critical, strategic, and creative skills to use and experience it; and finally, they require a motivation to use it. If one of these three levels fails, then we may be facing digital inequalities or disadvantages. Digital divides are then a matter of access-use-benefits (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2017).

The implications of this digital breach for individuals and communities can be of great extent. On the one hand and considering the demands of today's economy - highly interconnected, dynamic, and driven by technological advancements -, those that are excluded from accessing technology can risk lagging in terms of educational and employment opportunities. On the other, restricted access to online information can limit civic engagement and participation in various types of democratic processes - e.g., elections and legislative processes, engaging in the public sphere's discussions. There is also the matter of fear towards technology - doing something wrong, making some kind of mistake, or ending up in a difficult or dangerous situation. To make matters even more worrisome, digital exclusion can amplify pre-existing social and economic inequalities and prejudices and intensify the disparity between different media users.

## **Generational (dis)connections**

According to the Council of Europe, ageing and digitalization are two major trends and challenges of the 21st century (European Commission, n.d.). The technological evolutions and transformations that took place since the beginning of this millennium revolutionized the way different generations connect, but also engage with technologies. Digital and mobile media brought us closer together but also imposed new distances between individuals – something that seems kind of counterintuitive. New digital devices and technologies opened exciting avenues for intergenerational communication and engagement. Social media and video conferencing tools, for instance, provided younger and older individuals with new opportunities to connect, share their experiences, and overcome geographical distances. Looking at our recent past, these played a crucial role during the subsequent periods of lockdown that many countries faced during 2020 and 2021 (Azevedo et al., 2022; Padeiro et al., 2021). In contrast, they enhanced a novel set of fears – fear of missing out, of not knowing, of not understanding, of being vulnerable in digital environments. Some studies even highlight a fear that information and communication technologies (ICTs) may be painting a changed picture of human nature (Wu et al., 2015) or an overwhelming feeling towards its endless possibilities and functionalities (Mitzner et al., 2010).

Looking at these issues through the generational point of view, even though digital technologies and the internet are embedded in our lives, digital practices are not intrinsic to all individuals in every sphere of their lives. Knowing how to use technology, being diligent in carrying out internet searches, properly reading online information or participating in online activities involves different **access, knowledge, competencies, connections, and interests**. And I consider that these are key to understanding generational gaps in digital media usage and literacy.

## **Media education as a strategy to connect generations**

For the past years, my research has brought me closer to many Marthas, Mikes and Lucies. Taking these experiences as a basis, I will explore how reflecting on **access, knowledge, competencies, connections, interests and motivations** can help us positively address media education in an intergenerational manner, for an enriching and enlightened use of digital devices and technologies.

*Firstly, it's about whether you have and to what you have access.* Having or not having access to the devices will have an impact on the ways we understand technology, the usefulness we identify and in how comfortable we are with it. Therefore, it forms the essential foundation on which MIL is built. Just like a key unlocks a door, access to hardware, software, the internet, and educational opportunities can unlock the potential for individuals to participate in online learning, communication activities, and further opportunities for development and involvement in our interconnected world.

*Then, it's about what you learn – your **knowledge**.* Knowledge is a crucial base. Being able to navigate, understand, and make the most of the media depends greatly on having a solid understanding of various topics - basics of hardware and software, understanding online communication, data privacy, and how to assess digital information critically. But it is vital to recognize that people do not all learn the same things or in the same way. Being aware of these differences can help designing strategies that collaboratively enable knowledge creation, through sharing and mutual help. Just like a strong foundation is needed for a stable building, knowledge acts as the essential groundwork that enables people to interact confidently in a world that is increasingly connected, and technology driven.

*It's also about what you can do – your **competencies**.* For the past 22 years, Mark Prensky has been refuted. The flaws and prejudice that imbue the idea(l) of digital natives (Prensky, 2001) have opened the door for other labels that intend to describe generations from their media and digital competencies perspective. Yet, employing these concepts seems increasingly 'frivolous' when we look at data that highlights disparities that go beyond age gaps – e.g., demography, social and economic range. Developing MIL competencies in an intergenerational manner involves recognizing diverse skills and expertise across age groups. It centres on leveraging these differences for dynamic learning. By acknowledging each generation's strengths and fostering collaboration, it is possible to create an inclusive environment for skill exchange. Collaboration is crucial here - while older generations can provide traditional insights, younger ones can offer digital expertise. This exchange enriches collective understanding and camaraderie.

*But make no mistake because it's too about who you learn and develop knowledge and competencies with.* From a generational perspective, the

**connections** we establish with those we learn from carry great weight. In the SMaRT-EU – Social Media Resilience Toolkit (LC-01563446) project, the focus groups conducted with families showed that the close bond between grandparents and grandchildren contributed positively to learning about, consuming, and using the media. According to Oliveira, Brites & Cerqueira (2022), grandparents and grandchildren recognized that, despite the barriers and different interests, their complicity and comradeship had been essential for grandparents to become more media literate and curious about media technologies. Alongside this, the context was also relevant - the COVID-19 pandemic and the recurrent confinements strengthened their relationships by pushing them to communicate through digital platforms and devices (Oliveira, Brites & Cerqueira, 2022).

*Finally, it's about your **interests and motivations**.* However, if there is no interest or motivation to discover media, the aspects mentioned above will not have an impact on MIL competencies. Diving into the world of media and digital platforms requires an 'x' of curiosity that we cannot assume all individuals have. Michael is a typical example: he enjoyed his life, and his routines, he could get all the info he needed through the radio, newspaper, or television, and he could reach every relevant person in his life by calling them by phone or smartphone. So why change this? What were the benefits for him? Assuming that this resistance is wrong and that all individuals necessarily need to use the media to their full extent puts us - educational actors, researchers, thinkers, policymakers, and other citizens - in a position of prejudice.

## **Looking ahead**

Drawing from past experiences, this reflection looks into the important details that make intergenerational media education successful. By taking a closer look at things like how people get to technology, what they know, their skills, who they connect with, what interests them, and what motivates them might help us forge a transformative path towards embracing digital devices and technologies in an enriching and informed manner. This transcends a mere technological journey and involves weaving together the threads of access, knowledge, competencies, connections, interests, and motivations into an all-encompassing and enlightened approach. Through this collective effort, generations can develop the necessary characteristics to navigate the digital landscape harmoniously, fostering

a society that holds media and information literacy in high esteem while celebrating the diversity and uniqueness of intergenerational learning.

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