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NETWORK PROJECT

IDEALiC
Setting the Future Scene of e-inclusion

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SUMMARY

PROMOTORS: Prof. Dr. Leo Van Audenhove (imec-SMIT-VUB)
Prof. Dr. Patricia Vendramin (UCL-ESPO)

AUTHORS: Mariën, Ilse (imec-SMIT VUB)
Asmar, Axelle (imec-SMIT VUB)
Wauters, Chantal (imec-SMIT VUB)
Brotcorne, Périne (UCL-ESPO)
Faure, Laura (FTU-Namur)

Context

The ongoing digitization of services – both public and private – has led to an increased risk amongst the general population of being or becoming digitally excluded. The so-called digital turn is posing a threat for all individuals that do not have the necessary digital skills to handle the digitization of the various life domains. Though significant scientific effort is given to research on e-inclusion in Flanders, Wallonia and Belgium, knowledge is lacking about the extent to which the digitization of services, routines and practices is hampering the ability of individuals to participate fully in society. Recent studies have shown that the socio-economic background of individuals no longer solely defines digital exclusion and that mechanisms of digital exclusion go beyond socio-economic vulnerable groups. This implies that there is no longer a clear view on the groups at-risk of being or becoming digitally excluded. The traditionally defined two-folded and dichotomous categories of included versus excluded population groups – e.g. rich versus poor; young versus old; or male versus female – are no longer valid. New and more contextualized approaches are therefore needed to identify those at-risk of being digitally excluded. Research by experts in the field emphasizes that digital skills and the ability to deal with digital media in an autonomous and strategic way are of increasing importance to ensure one's full societal participation. This move towards strategic goals and added value gained through the use of digital media is also visible at the level of e-inclusion policies that have shifted from the mere provision of physical access to broader societal goals such as empowerment, inclusion and participation.

Objectives

The IDEALiC project aims to address these issues by focusing on setting the new scene of e-inclusion for the upcoming years. The central research question of the IDEALiC project is how e-inclusion policies and initiatives can provide solutions for the mechanisms of digital exclusion that coincide with the digital turn. With this research, the project partners aim at taking e-inclusion research in Belgium to the next level by applying an innovative approach at theoretical, empirical and policy level.

The IDEALiC project is built upon an interdisciplinary methodological approach that combines qualitative user-oriented research, comparative research, policy analysis, and a basic quantitative data-analysis from existing data sources. More specifically, the IDEALiC research will focus on following aspects:

- Provide renewed insights on the aspects that define autonomous and independent use of ICT based on existing frameworks for digital skills.
- Critically review the recent evolution of e-inclusion policies towards an increased focus on aspects as empowerment, inclusion and participation. What exactly is meant by these concepts and what kind of normative interpretations does this

imply for e-inclusion strategies, both at the level of policy, implementation and evaluation?

- Provide a state of the art of the current situation of the e-inclusion field in Belgium (i.e. actors and policy fields), complemented by a critical reflection on how an ideal e-inclusion policy in Belgium should be constructed at local, regional and (inter)national level.
- Deliver a renewed state of the art of figures on e-inclusion in Belgium, based upon a basic quantitative analysis of secondary data that is readily available.
- Carry out an empirical study that examines experiences of e-inclusion from a life course perspective and a user media profile viewpoint, rather than from a two-folded and dichotomous view based upon socio-economic variables. In-depth interviews will be carried out with respondents that belong to three different life stages: (1) age 18 to 30 (i.e. the period in which individuals are building up autonomy and steadily increase their social, economic and political participation in society; (2) age 31 to 50 (i.e. the period in which individuals are assumed to have developed autonomy and participate fully in society; and (3) age 51-70 (i.e. the period in which they desire to remain active participants of society and to remain independent while aging is considered an important policy challenge).
- Study the relationship between the suppliers of digitized services and citizens. This part will provide answers on questions such as: Do institutions at the supply side reflect upon mechanisms of digital exclusion when digitizing their services? Or, to what extent do they undertake actions to ensure all citizens are capable of using their digitized services in an autonomous way? This will be done by means of three case studies, i.e. mobility, mutual health insurances, brussels.be portal.
- Use an actor-driven and participatory approach in order to include actors from policy, public service, private sector, civil society, poverty organizations and similar institutions in the development of e-inclusion policy recommendations to ensure an effective take-up and implementation of the research results.

Conclusions

The IDEALiC project has highlighted several important aspects that need to be taken into account when proceeding with the digitalization of society. The conclusions can be split up in three main domains:

(1) Overall strategy and e-inclusion policy

The policy analysis clearly shows that an overarching transversal digital inclusion policy is lacking in Belgium. As a consequence, actions taken by the different policy levels, within different policy domains, by public institutions, civil society organisations and so forth, remain highly scattered. Coordination is more intensive in Flanders with Mediawijs, the Knowledge Center for Media Literacy. However, their main focus lies on

media literacy and media education. Their role in terms of e-inclusion should be strengthened and dedicated personnel and working costs should be allocated so they can take up their primary role as coordinating body for e-inclusion in Flanders. For the French speaking community, coordination should be strengthened by founding an organisation similar to Mediawijs but aimed specifically at French speaking stakeholders. In Brussels, the coordinating role of Fobagra/Caban was emphasized but it also requires to be strengthened in terms of dedicated personnel and working costs, along with increased investments in the provision of support to digicoaches and trainers of e-inclusion intermediaries. Additionally, the role of intermediary organisations in both the Flemish speaking as the French speaking region should be acknowledged and structurally integrated in a government-wide transversal digital inclusion policy. In summary, seen that digitalization has entered every life domain, it is clear that the time is now to develop an overarching transversal digital inclusion policy at both regional and federal level that serves as the point of reference for all future digital inclusion actions and initiatives.

(2) The provision of inclusive digital services, both public and private

The qualitative research and the use case analysis both show that various issues are being created by the continuous digitalization of public and private services. It has become clear that those who are lacking access, motivation, skills or support, are not able to participate fully in today's digital society. And moreover, that especially at the offer side extensive room for improvement is available. The use case analysis highlights that e-inclusion is not fundamentally and structurally taken into account when digitalizing services, because of several reasons. It is clear that there is a certain willingness to provide inclusive services, but that there is an overall lack of knowledge and expertise about best practices on how to develop e-inclusive digital applications and platforms. Co-creation approaches rarely take into account vulnerable groups, especially as these are often invisible and hard-to-reach. Long term reflections about the impact on non-users or low-skilled users are lacking. Further investments, both in terms of personnel as in working costs for initiatives such as the Digital Playbook by BOSA at federal level, are also needed at regional level. The Digital Playbook delivers a whole series of good practices that enables public entities to invest in the development of inclusive public services. A similar approach should be deployed at regional level (e.g. Flanders, Wallonia) and local level (e.g. cities, municipalities, public institutions...).

(3) The support of citizens with low digital skills

The IDEALiC project shows high levels of digital pressure being put on citizens. Digital platforms and applications have been integrated in every life domain, but this is not experienced as a positive evolution by all respondents. The research highlights the importance of a number of underpinning elements:

- Digital fluidity is key. This refers to the ability of users to shift between platforms and applications to fulfil the digital tasks individual need. To give an example, this refers to the ability to shift from using WhatsApp on your tablet, to using it on your phone or on the desktop application. Instead of developing tool-based competences in formal and non-formal trainings, focus should lie on flexibility, problem-solving capabilities and self-confidence to independently steer a trial-and-error approach when being confronted with digital technologies.

- Data literacy is a key competence for the future. Concerns about applications that are privacy-invasive or use data to steer behavior are expressed intensively. The research shows that a vast part of the population does not comprehend the complexity of current data and AI-driven systems, which in turn incites mistrust, which at the end might result in an overall rejection of certain technologies, applications or platforms. Developing data literacy – meaning understanding how certain applications use personal data for which purpose – amongst the public at large is necessary to re-establish trust in technologies and enable a balanced consideration of the choice for (non-) use of data driven technologies.

- Access to services has become the primary concern, whereas the tools through which this access is obtained has become secondary. The research has shown that people first and foremost want to access and use the applications and services they need to fulfil their daily routines and immediate needs and wants. This implies that from a policy perspective, providing mere access to a specific device is insufficient, and moreover, that providing accessible and user-friendly services on any device is primordial.

Keywords

Digital exclusion – digital inequalities – e-inclusion – digital skills – inclusion-by-design – digital public services – data literacy – support mechanisms