

# Ageism and IT: Social Representations, Exclusion and Citizenship in the Digital Age

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**Abstract.** The benefits of the introduction of technology in human life may be puzzled with the world evolution. Although the use of technology is limited by geographic, cultural and economic parameters, the benefits for mankind are proved every. However, the movement of globalization promoted by technology also produces new economical and social exclusions. Therefore, an idea of injustice arises. The aim of this paper is to discuss the condition of second-class citizenship of the elderly as a consequence of globalization.

**Keywords:** Ageism · ITC · Social exclusion

## 1 Introduction

In the recent years, the emergence of Internet enhances a new and dynamic model of communication. Network technologies present to man a new challenge: to rethink the reality and rework the image of himself and his environment. Therefore, it is impossible to think technology as an isolated element of society. Technology has proved to be an unequivocal benefit for mankind in public and private life. Different technological devices like mobile phones, computers or Internet have changed mankind all over the world in several spheres and areas. For instance, Health, Education, Economics, Communication and even Politics have improved significantly with technology. Although the use of technology is limited by geographic, cultural and economic parameters, the benefits for mankind are proved every day in simple things like connecting people geographic distant with a mobile phone or take a radiograph to help in a medical diagnosis. However, the movement of globalization promoted by technology also produces new economical and social exclusions. As Castells e Catterall argued, «this information age has never been a technological matter. It has always been a matter of social transformation, a process of social change in which technology is an element that is inseparable from social, economic, cultural and political trends» (2001: 3). The theoretical framework of this paper fits in the new digital scenario and in an urgent update of concepts to the reality that tend to establish itself as dominant in Western societies: the info inclusion. This paper discusses social representations, exclusion and digital

exclusion as a consequence of globalization and as a condition of second-class citizenship for those who do not have access to digital capital.

Internet may represent an opportunity for inclusion and improve quality of life of citizens, especially for senior individuals. However, demographic and socio-cultural changes push the elderly towards digital and social exclusion. Increased age is also associated with decreased levels of Internet access, limited modes of use and patterns of connecting. Age differences are especially pronounced in those individuals aged 60 years and over. The behavior of elderly people in the context of the Internet may depend on their country, socio-economic status, education, family structure, race, gender, geography location, as well as cultural and social participation.

## 2 Social Representations of Ageism

Social representations arise from the socialization process and are directly associated with collective identity. Social facts can be understood as modes of action and the representations that are external to the individual. According to Durkheim (1964), society and the collective conscience are moral entities. Hence what people feel, think or do is independent of his individual will, which means that the behavior is established by society. From this perspective, social facts exert a coercive power. Therefore, it is something that exists and remains beyond the individual. In this sense, the construction of symbolic representations shared by members of social systems inhabits a universe of particular socialization.

In contemporary times there are multiple records that demonstrate that the present highlights major changes that affect both our lifestyles and the way we represent the others and ourselves. Several authors who reflect these societal transformations denominate the current period of ‘reflexive modernity’ (Beck et al. 1997), ‘postmodernity’ (Hall 1998), ‘late modernity’ (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Giddens 1997) or ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman 2000). These perspectives open a new historical period, which emphasize the uncertainty, fluidity, individualism and insecurity. Despite the heterogeneous terms used in the characterization of the current socio-historical moment is consensual accept that stagiast linearity associated with the life cycle no longer reflects changes toward individualization and pluralisation that currently occur.

Ageing as a ‘social problem’ has emerged recently as one of the main challenges facing contemporary societies. The dimensions of ageing and its social importance have elevated it to a national and international political discourse and brought it into the domain of public opinion. Evidence of the socially constructed nature of the ageing phenomenon (Debert 1999) can be seen in the recent efforts in discursive ‘requalification’ of ageing, as it emerges linked to a terminological plurality of which the adjectives ‘productive’, ‘healthy’, ‘successful’, ‘positive’ and ‘active’ are the best illustration. The purpose of these new public terminologies has been, since the 1980s in the USA (AARP 2010) and the 1990s in Europe, to remove the negative image and social representation with which the concept of ageing is burdened. Affirming this revaluation of ageing, since the 1980s and 90s respectively organizations such as the WHO and the EU have launched the challenge nowadays known as ‘active ageing’. A different view of the phenomenon

is advocated, together with new approaches and political solutions in societies that value productiveness, youth and autonomy. These are, however, some of the factors that produce a negative image of old age, and the concept of active ageing itself therefore aims to combat the stereotyped production of negative ageism or, in other words, discrimination based on preconceptions directed towards one particular age group.

Ageing has emerged recently as one of the main challenges to present-day societies. Its dimensions and social importance have elevated it to a national and international political discourse and brought it into the domain of public opinion. The recent attempt at a discursive 'requalification' of ageing is evidence of the socially constructed nature of the phenomenon, associated with a plurality of terms of which the adjectives 'productive', 'healthy', 'successful', 'positive' and 'active' are the clearest examples.

Along with the impact of ageist stereotyping, the effects of institutionalizing the elderly have aggravated the representational image, since institutionalization signifies not only change, but also a break with the lifestyle, identities and social roles of the elderly. This leads to a determination of new forms of recognition and relationship (Daniel 2006). Several authors think that the negative stereotypes of 'old age' are still prevalent today (Palmore 2005). This prevalence will determine types of discrimination, studied by Alves and Novo (2006), who concluded that there is a strong awareness of ageist discrimination in Portugal.

As an academic concept, the term 'active ageing', the successor to concepts such as 'healthy ageing' or 'successful ageing', is far from consensual. In fact it was produced and has been conveyed essentially through political discourse. In 1997 the World Health Organization, inspired by the United Nations Principles for Older Persons, presented the concept of active ageing, defined as "the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age" (2002: 12).

An important body of scientific literature examines the evolution of political ideas on ageing on an international level in the world agenda since the Vienna World Assembly on Ageing in 1982 (Kildal 2009; Kildal and Nilssen 2010; Marin and Zaidi 2008; Nilssen 2009; Walker 2002; Walker 2008; Zelenev 2008). In this context we would highlight the critical analyses of policies and discourses on ageing, contrasting the EU's linking of the concept (from the 1990s onwards) to the economic and productivist discourse of the sustainability of states of well-being, with the broader concept centered on quality of life and rights contained in the WHO proposal (Kildal 2009; Nilssen 2009). The latter seeks to distance itself from the negative social representation influencing the concept of ageing, as the product of ageist stereotyping that emphasizes economic importance, dependency and lack of autonomy, and also from the idea of 'productive ageing' (Walker 2008). The 2002 Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing was another sign of this paradigm shift, envisaging the need to change the social image of elderly people, old age and ageing. It also revealed the existence of gender differences and the implications of gendering ageing.

One of the most interesting works on the European discourse on ageing is by Alan Walker (2002, 2008). Since the Treaty of Lisbon, according to Walker (2008), two perspectives have defined the EU discourse on ageing: a more productivist discourse centered on employment, and a more 'comprehensive' discourse centered on diversity,

heterogeneity, well-being and health throughout life, which he terms the “deserving or compassionate mode”.

The need to pay attention to the heterogeneous nature of the situation and experiences of elderly people and the way in which (age, gender and socio-economic) differences make experiences of ageing very specific is one of the main warnings to political agents found in critical scientific literature (Walker 2008). This paper assumes that there is a tension and even a certain public dyslexia with regard to the phenomenon of ageing and old age. As evidence, we can mention the prevalence of negative ageist stereotypes that associate old age with dependency, lack of autonomy, illness, institutionalization and a lack of consideration for its heterogeneity (with reference to gender, for example). We also note a national and international public discourse that fosters positive stereotyping, molded by a concept of Active Ageing that aims to keep the elderly involved in civic, political and economic life as much as possible. However, the increasing technological changes of contemporary society refer the digitally excluded for a under citizenship condition. Due to different socio-cultural and economic factors, the elderly population is not equally endowed with the same digital knowledge of others. It follows that their citizen condition is substantially weakened.

### 3 Ageism and IT: Social Exclusion in the Digital Age

Digital divide refers to the gap that exists between those who can access and use (digital) technologies and information/content effectively, and those who cannot. Nevertheless it would be misleading to think of this divide as two separate fields instead of a gradation or continuum. As Selwyn puts it, digital divide «can be seen as a practical embodiment of the wider theme of social inclusion» (2004: 343). At the same time, effective access and use are dependent not only on economic conditions but also on social and cultural resources, considering individual and community levels. This means that digital divide must no more be understood as merely a ‘technical’ issue but also as a social one, involving dimensions like «skills, informed choice, content and community» (Selwyn and Facer 2007). Or, as Sorj (2008: 62) puts it, «[t]here is a strong correlation between the digital divides and other forms of social inequality». Because of the dualistic logic implied in this concept (haves and have-nots), this concept is increasingly less used.

The increasing technological changes of contemporary society refer the digitally excluded for a second-class citizenship condition. Due to different socio-cultural and economic factors, the elderly population is not equally endowed with the same digital knowledge of others. It follows that their citizen condition is substantially weakened.

Social exclusion, as a consequence of digital illiteracy, is a reality for millions of people around the world. This social phenomenon can lead to a global sense of injustice as it enhances info-exclusion as a contributing factor to the categorization of ‘disadvantaged groups’.

The dimensions of social exclusion - assuming that these are not synonymous with poverty – can be defined as multidimensional, dynamic, relational, contextual and active. In this perspective and in the context of digital illiteracy, the ‘disadvantaged groups’ can be characterized in a multidimensional scale, which includes indicators of the absence

of social rights and micro levels of social exclusion, and delimit the groups cut off from the digital information society by these reasons. Empowerment is the keyword of the several recommendations documents that are focused on teaching, good practices, induction of cultural shift and public-private partnerships at regional and national levels through different approaches. 'Disadvantaged groups' include elderly, even though the policies and political discourses.

A study from Pew Research Center states that 59 % of American adults over 65 years of age use the Internet. The data was collected in September 2013 and reveals that 71 % of the senior citizens with access to the Internet go online every day. Internet use differs by age, education and household income. The report shows that 87 % of seniors with a college degree go online as well as 74 % of seniors among 65–69 years old. 90 % of the higher-income seniors use the Internet. There is a direct correlation between well-educated seniors and higher levels of income. The study discloses that 90 % of older adults with an annual household income of \$75,000 or more go online and 82 % have broadband at home. Seniors receiving less than \$30,000 annually, 39 % go online and 25 % have broadband at home. 87 % of seniors with a college degree go online and 76 % are broadband adopters. Among older adults who have not attended college, 40 % go online and only 27 % have broadband at home. The report stresses that a significant majority of seniors state that they need assistance in order to use new digital devices. 77 % of American older adults indicate they would need help to access the Internet, while only 18 % states that feel comfortable to learn how to use a new technology device. Among the seniors who go online, 56 % state that need help to use social networking sites to connect and to interact with family members and friends.

Among the Internet-using elderly in United States, 46 % use social networking sites and 88 % use regularly email services. The top motivations for getting online are pointed to be communication with others and family, shopping and access to health information. 47 % of the older adults have a high-speed broadband connection at home 77 % have a cell phone.

In 2012 the population of the European Union reaches 500 million people. The reduction in birth rates over the past decades has contributed to a gradual aging of the population and a significant change in the 'age pyramid'. According to a study from Eurostat, 75 % of individuals in the European Union use the Internet in 2013 and 72 % on a regular basis. Digital divides in European Union persist as regards to age group, formal education and by country. The highest percentage of non-use of Internet is registered in Romania (42 %), Bulgaria (41 %) and Greece (36 %). In all countries, 55–74 age group registered a 46 percentage. Nearly 90 % of the European seniors online use the email and 60 % read online news and search for information about health. However, only 27 % participate in social networking sites. The share of senior users making telephone and video calls through internet-based applications is 25 %. In the 55–74 age group, one in ten users posted on civic or political issues in sites, blogs and e-government or other websites. Nearly 60 % of Internet users aged 55–74 read online news and searched for information about health. 50 % of the users consulted wikis. Among the European seniors, only 14 % use mobile devices to connect to the Internet. Within this age group it is more likely to have used a portable computer for Internet connections.

## 4 Conclusions

The ‘individualization’ stands in the mainstream of political agendas to value the individual as a builder of his career in the life course. Active ageing exemplifies this logic in the new guidelines that encourage the creation of opportunities for individuals to map their courses to life in this way, achieving live with greater quality of life. The Declaration of Alma-Ata (1978) appeals to health for all and the need for health promotion models no top-down (WHO 2002). It is the recognition of people’s participation in promoting their citizenship as «the right and duty of the people to participate individually and collectively in the planning and delivery of health care». Giving digital competence to the protagonists is a way to empower them as this concept is assumed as «a transversal key competence, enabling the acquisition of other key competences» and has been broadly defined by the European Commission as «the confident, critical and creative use of ICT to achieve goals related to work, employability, learning, leisure, inclusion and/or participation in society».

During the World Assembly on Ageing Human, Kofi Annan quoted the African saying «when an ancient dies, a library disappears». However, today we are far from the models of learning based on the oral transmission of memories. The new learning models require training throughout life, oriented knowledge in permanent mutation and transformation in a world where information flows at a speed impossible to reach.

Contemporary society is founded on the permanent technological changes. In this regard, empowerment through knowledge is the only option that seems valid in today’s world. The info inclusion as the dominant reality tends to turn elderly into citizens with fewer rights. Considering the Internet as a social and participatory space, it is imperative that active ageing would be promoted within the ICT context. The change in social and communicative paradigm, participatory culture and collective intelligence, reinvention of the concept of community, redefinition of the public sphere, the metamorphosis of the territory notion, interactions and digital communications, new forms of sociability and social dynamics based in technology are elements of an ongoing structural change that has implications for the entire population.

The label of ‘retirement age’ directly linked to the use of technical difficulty produces not only info excluded as considerably accentuates the gap between citizens and between age groups. It follows that we consider essential to develop synergies between different entities with responsibilities in society, in order to implement intervention projects for a digital citizenship in the context of active ageing. Promoting digital literacy is an effective approach to avoid digital divides and integrate the elderly in the context of new technologies.

In a civic camping in Barcelona, in May 2011, Manuel Castells stated that «communication for all of society is a fundamental right: free communication, autonomous and worldwide is a right as fundamental as health and education». In the words of the author, «this right is realized today through the Internet and by mobile networks as a fundamental human right». Against the condition second-class citizenship that the digital divide bans elderly citizens, we fully endorse the arguments of Castells.

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