INSIGHTS   <u>IN FOCUS</u>

Older adults – an important target group for media and information literacy activities?

Activities aimed at enhancing MIL skills commonly target younger people. But there are a couple of initiatives that cater specifically for people over 60.

They are called "best agers," "people of the elegant age" or simply "older adults" – people over the age of 60 have been "discovered" as a target group by many industries from fashion to sustainable tourism. Of late, they have also become an increasingly important group for Media and Information Literacy (MIL) advocates.

Activities aimed at enhancing MIL skills commonly target younger people. The rationale: Youngsters are still in the process of developing their ability to access, use, and create media responsibly while growing up with a multitude of media platforms where misinformation, hate speech and online threats are imminent. If they step up their MIL competencies now, they can shape a better future. But there are a couple of initiatives that have broadened their scope and decided to cater specifically for people over 60.

Why focus on older people? Insights from Ukraine, Botswana, and Spain

For Diana Dutsyk, executive director of the *Ukrainian Media and Communication Institute*, the reasons are obvious: "Adults above the age of 60 make up a little more than a quarter of Ukraine's population and are still the most active when it comes to voting, so they have a significant impact on society and politics." In the Ukrainian context, another factor weighs heavily: "The second reason is Russia's war against Ukraine and the information threats that this war poses to every Ukrainian citizen when having up-to-date and true information often matters for the physical survival of people." Against this backdrop, Dutsyk and her team are currently developing an educational model for media literacy that is supposed to serve as a framework for working with older adults both in Ukraine and other countries.

The times when older people were mostly absent from the social web are over

David Moepeng, cybersecurity awareness specialist at *Cybersmart Botswana*, also states very immediate and practical reasons for offering media literacy training focusing on digital literacy skills for older people: "In Botswana, there are a lot of phishing scams, smishing scams, or whatever form of scam that criminals keep coming up with, that target pensioners. They have lost a lot of money." That is why, about two years ago, *Cybersmart Botswana*, an organization known for its community-based digital literacy campaigns, started to offer workshops specifically catering for older citizens.

"It goes beyond just protecting them; media literacy is about protecting the democratic system we are living in"

One European project that is currently in its pilot phase is "Seniors United Against Disinformation" (SUM). Lorenzo Marini, co-founder and co-director of Catalan fact-checking and digital media literacy platform *Verificat*, runs it together with partners

from Finland (*University of Lapland*) and Italy (*Housatonic*). Marini, too, highlights older adults' societal influence as a motivation for starting SUM: "This age group usually has a high voter turnout, they play a role in the education of their grandchildren, in the political debate. It goes beyond just protecting them; media literacy is about protecting the democratic system we are living in." He also points out that the times when older people were mostly absent from the social web are over: "They use Facebook, they use WhatsApp, and there is evidence that over 65-year-olds are more likely to share fake news articles."

Indeed, a   study by researchers from New York University and Princeton University determined age as a decisive factor in terms of who spread false articles during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign: American Facebook users over the age of 65 were found to share "nearly seven times as many articles from fake news domains as the youngest age group." A potential explanation, according to the authors, could be that they lack "the level of digital media literacy necessary to reliably determine the trustworthiness of news encountered online." While this data may hold true for the United States, there is not much evidence on how age interacts with the sharing of online content from other parts of the world, let alone from countries in the Global South. So how do MIL experts from other regions assess the need for a greater focus on people from older generations?

"You can't access the young people without talking to the elders"

Older people's decisions affect youth and communities

Given the scarcity of existing research we've asked five MIL experts for their opinion. Most of them have targeted older people indirectly in their MIL efforts, for instance, via activities that focus on underserved communities. This is the case for Eddie Ávila, director of *Rising Voices,* a Global Voices initiative promoting the digital

inclusion of under-represented and marginalized communities. His guess would be that, in Bolivia (where he is based), social class, connectivity and access to education are more decisive factors for MIL levels than age because most MIL resources seem geared toward a certain sector of society that may have more access to information. But Ávila recognizes that older people's societal influence is a good reason to boost their ability to access, analyze, create and reflect on media: "Just the fact that they're still in positions of power, decision making positions, especially in some indigenous communities. In some of these communities, elders are very much revered and looked up to as those who have the knowledge."

This idea of elders as "gatekeepers" is echoed by Jonathan Tusubira, a media development consultant and trainer in Uganda: "In many regions you can't access the young people without talking to the elders. The decisions they make affect youth and communities." This is something Tusubira knows from experience, as a MIL4KIDZ and TEENZ trainer. But he believes it is also important to offer special MIL training for older Ugandans.

Immigrants from a pre-internet era

One reason in favor of specialized MIL for older people is that this age group have been socialized in a different – that is, non-digital – media environment. Challenges that older people face as "digital immigrants" were widely acknowledged by the experts we interviewed around the world. In Tusubira's view, these challenges can make older people more susceptible to mis- or disinformation: "Before, everything that you heard on traditional media was taken as truth. The age group that has grown up in that era has the same mindset when they access info online."

Osama Manzar is the founder and director of the *Digital Empowerment Foundation*, an organization using digital tools to eradicate information poverty in India. He argues along the same lines but rather sees the need to renew existing skills of older people in India. "Seniors' sense of critical thinking was on the older media. Now, they are sitting on a new media platform and don't know how to behave or how to consume or how to produce content," Manzar said.

Digital inclusion is social inclusion

All five MIL experts interviewed shared a sense that every member of the society – irrespective of their age – deserves to be able to confidently access, use, and create media that are relevant for participation in social and economic life. According to Wallace Gichunge, a media and information literacy expert from Kenya, this is

particularly true in his country where most government services, including information about healthcare, have been digitized. "When we look at the mediatization in the world today, the old people are in it as much as the young ones," highlights Gichunge. For him, MIL is "an empowerment tool to be able to survive in this world." Lizette Feris agrees. The project manager at DW Akademie's Southern Africa office in Windhoek has been working on MIL projects in Namibia for more than six years and says empowerment through MIL is especially relevant for older people. "Just imagine how much of their wisdom is not being documented and getting lost," she says. "With increased MIL competence, they could document their wisdom and stories digitally."

There are plenty of reasons for considering older adults a special target group for media and information literacy activities – with slight differences and specifics across world regions. Still, older age does not seem to be the decisive factor for defining a target group. Other intersecting criteria – such as access to digital technology or media usage – deserve closer attention. Seniors themselves also don't want their age to be their defining feature. As Lorenzo Marini from the SUM project points out: "One piece of advice: Do not advertise your MIL workshop as 'for older people' - or they won't come!"

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DW RECOMMENDS

MIL

1 Media and Information Literacy

PUBLICATIONS ON MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY

2 Publications on Media and Information Literacy