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Digital In- and Exclusion in Everyday Life: Practices and Literacies Across the Lifespan

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Abstract

In this thematic issue of *Media and Communication* titled Practices of Digital In- and Exclusion in Everyday Life, we bring together insights from around the world to offer a diverse set of perspectives on digital practices and digital literacies across the lifespan. Moreover, emphasizing the development of digital literacies as a situated social practice, this thematic issue provides insights into the social contexts through which people develop digital literacy practices, how they construct and integrate social norms around technologies, and the links between digital literacies and (digital) citizenship. As concerns about digital in- and exclusion grow, this thematic issue hosts numerous relevant studies by academics that collectively help us gain insight into the impact of digital in- and exclusion in everyday life across the lifespan, gaining insight into the role of different contextual factors, including time, place, and social, economic, and political contexts in the ways in which citizens use digital media and develop digital literacies.

Keywords

citizenship; digital inclusion; digital exclusion; digital literacies; lifespan development; socio-digital inequalities

1. Introduction

In this thematic issue of *Media and Communication*, Practices of Digital In- and Exclusion in Everyday Life, we bring together insights from around the world to offer a diverse set of perspectives on digital practices and digital literacies across the lifespan. Over the past decades, scholars from various academic disciplines have researched digital inequalities and digital literacies from pedagogical, sociological, post-colonial, gender,

socio-economic, political, technical and many other scientific paradigms. This has led to a broad range of conceptual frameworks for digital literacies, as well as explorations of the various “new” literacies that are necessary for participation in digital societies. However, these literacies are not static. Instead, different life stages necessitate varying digital literacies, and these also differ globally. How citizens use digital media is dependent on the contexts they are in (Snyder & Prinsloo, 2007). By approaching this development through the lens of citizens’ lifespan, we try to gain an understanding of how different contextual factors, including time, place, and social, economic, and political contexts impact the ways in which people use digital media and develop digital literacies.

In the first article of this thematic issue (Mensonides et al., 2024), we propose to conceptualize these digital literacies as personalized pedagogical processes aimed at the way citizens use, misuse, intertwine, and appropriate digital practices within their daily practices. We focus on how people experience digital in- and exclusion in different temporal, personal, and spatial contexts across the lifespan, what methodological frameworks are best suited to study digital inequalities, and how digital literacies and digital skills are embedded in everyday digital practices. Drawing from this understanding, we seek to gain insights into the social, civic, and political implications of digital in- and exclusion in people’s everyday life. This thematic issue analyzes citizens’ experiences in different stages of their lives, including childhood and adolescence, adulthood, parenthood, and old age. By adopting a user-centric perspective, this thematic issue contributes to an understanding of the factors that enable or hinder individuals’ participation in a digital society and underscores the value and impact of these skills throughout various stages of people’s daily lives.

2. Developing Digital Literacies Across the Lifespan

From the moment children are born, their lives are saturated with (digital) media. As media have become integrated into the varying social contexts of children’s everyday lives, they have become a prime source of entertainment, social interaction, and play (Ito et al., 2010). Despite the persistent belief that children raised in a digitalized society automatically come to possess technological skills, an increasing amount of research indicates that there is variability in both the skills and media usage of these so-called “digital natives” (Bennett et al., 2008). For example, children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to be exposed to TV, electronic games, and non-informational computer activities as opposed to their peers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Harris et al., 2017). In addition, vulnerable young people and children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to translate their digital media use into digital skills (Livingstone et al., 2023).

In this thematic issue, Vermeire and Van den Broeck (2024) scrutinize the digital inclusion of socially vulnerable youth by focusing on digital youth work initiatives that use and discuss digital media and technology. Based on their analysis of 14 digital youth work best practices, they identify four success factors to include young people who might be digitally excluded in digital initiatives. Considering the importance of young people’s diverse social backgrounds, the contribution of Oliveira et al. (2024) examines young people’s engagement with news and digital citizenship dynamics through a systematic literature review. They find that disparities in media participation practices among minority groups point to digital exclusion and explore the changing, multifaceted, and differing nature of youth’s political participation across varying cultural settings. Lastly, Boulianne and Hoffmann (2024), and Brites et al. (2024), study different aspects of the development of digital literacies during childhood and adolescence. The former examines young adults’

active and passive curation practices on Instagram to acquire news, civic, and political information, while the latter explores young people's understanding of algorithms. Boulianne and Hoffmann's (2024) exploration of curation practices offers new insights into the ways in which citizens consume news across generations and life stages. Brites et al. (2024) contextualize their findings within the everyday lives of participants and argue that learning processes about algorithms are connected to their experiences in formal learning environments and related to the educational, social, political, and economic contexts in which young people live. These studies collectively enhance our understanding of how children and young individuals from diverse social backgrounds acquire the skills and attitudes necessary to act as informed citizens in an increasingly digital society.

Adulthood requires autonomy and self-reliance when it comes to media use, fostering a broad array of opportunities and risks that affect how potential resources are acquired from digital media. These opportunities and risks are largely dependent upon pre-existing socio-digital inequalities, terms of access, support structures, and varying levels of digital literacy (Dezuanni et al., 2023; Helsper, 2021). Hence, digital literacies and digital inclusion in this life stage are particularly important to enable broader participation in society, especially now progressively more key societal processes are becoming digital by default. The study of Kappeler (2024) illuminates the role digital literacies have in digital in- and exclusion rooted in everyday life, comparing a self-reported digital skills measure with an evaluation-based knowledge measure. Faith and Hernandez (2024) add to these insights by exploring the first two levels of the digital divide in terms of the affordances and use of smartphones and tablets by disadvantaged adults experiencing limited connectivity and outcomes. Loukili et al. (2024) study how access and digital inclusion within e-health contexts are situated in regard to the capabilities and barriers vulnerable adults face when having to rely on self-check-in kiosks to ensure effective health care. Lastly, the study of Priyadharma (2024) gives a contrasting perspective from the Global South, showing how digital in- and exclusion is shaped in local communities in Indonesia by exploring case studies through a "periphery-centric approach." These studies offer different perspectives on how adulthood in regard to capabilities and limitations entails a wide range of possibilities to appropriate affordances of digital media to personal and situated circumstances. However, they also show how everyday realities of digital in- and exclusion are underpinned by complex interrelated dynamics of socio-digital inequalities rooted in asymmetric power structures, fostering diverse barriers in relation to access, usage, and the possibility of experiencing positive outcomes from digital participation.

Understanding experiences with digital in- and exclusion of parents becomes increasingly paramount in fostering supportive and inclusive digital environments both in- and outside of the home. Parents play an important role in mediating their children's media use (Dedkova & Mýlek, 2022) and serve as important role models for shaping children's media use (Nikken & Schols, 2015). As parenthood represents a life stage during which responsibilities and priorities shift, the integration of digital media further shapes the landscape of parental experience. The work of Robbeets et al. (2024) in this thematic issue highlights the contextualized, nuanced, and multifaceted dimensions of parents' experiences with digital media, which go beyond access and usage. Their exploration of the uses of digital media in parenting sheds light on four dialectical dimensions: the role of digital media in supporting or challenging parents informationally, emotionally, socially, and organizationally. The role of digital skills during parenthood is also explored in the contribution of Ragnedda et al. (2024), who explore what sociodemographic and sociotechnical aspects shape the digital skills of users with school-aged children. Their study contributes to a body of knowledge on parental digital competencies and shows that parents' use of media is dependent on their social, cultural,

and economic contexts. These factors furthermore play a role in how parents can derive opportunities and benefits from their media use to navigate the complexities of modern parenthood.

In late adulthood, seniors become more dependent upon social support structures for digital inclusion. Studies show that they experience more barriers towards access and digital media usage, stemming from a lack of social resources, declining physical abilities, and different accompanying intersectional factors (Gellner et al., 2021; Oh et al., 2021). Additionally, the digitalisation of societies necessitates constantly adapting to novel digital technologies and developing digital literacies. However, seniors largely struggle with these dynamics, underpinned by differences in access, resources, and capabilities to learn and act. This fosters digital inequality, as more seniors are unable to adapt to key societal processes becoming digital. In their contribution, Zhu et al. (2024) highlight how elderly people in rural China are digitally excluded from digital healthcare systems by limited access and digital skills. Pasitselska (2024) adds to these insights by exploring the challenges and compensation strategies tied to the digital literacies of older adults in Ukraine during the (digital) war. These studies illustrate that identity formation, agency and self-(in)efficacy are paramount when it comes to fostering resilience, empowerment, and digital inclusion in late adulthood.

3. Conclusion

The studies in this thematic issue afford an in-depth understanding of how people from various socioeconomic backgrounds, ages, different levels of education, and in different cultural and national contexts develop digital literacies throughout their lives, and under what circumstances these become valuable for their participation and inclusion. This helps to advance knowledge about how digital literacies are developed from young towards older age, the various social contexts in which these processes take place, and how such knowledge is appropriated, shaped, and employed within informal and formal everyday practices and settings. Moreover, emphasizing the development of digital literacies as a situated social practice gives insights into the social contexts through which people develop digital literacy practices, how they construct and integrate social norms around technologies, and the links between digital literacies and (digital) citizenship. As concerns about digital in- and exclusion grow, this thematic issue hosts numerous relevant studies by academics that collectively help us gain insight into the impact of digital in- and exclusion in everyday life across the lifespan.

Hence, this thematic issue argues for the importance of developing digital literacies not only in early life stages, but in a polemical and holistic manner across the lifespan. Consequently, we understand lifelong learning as an essential underpinning of developing and appropriating digital literacies to fluid personal needs, capable of reflexively adjusting the preferences of diverse publics in ever-changing digital societies.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Denise Mensonides is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Media and Journalism Studies at the University of Groningen. She holds an LLB in IT law and an MSc in pedagogical sciences. Her work focuses on how children (ages 8–12) from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds develop digital literacy. In her research, she explores themes of digital citizenship, news literacy, digital resilience, and social capital development.



Alex Smit is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Media and Journalism Studies at the University of Groningen. Alex studies how low-literate citizens understand, value, and interpret information in their everyday lives, what aspects of contemporary digital literacy frameworks they experience as problematic and/or important in their civic activities, and how they experience digital exclusion and (digital) inequalities.



Maud Rebergen is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Media and Journalism Studies at the University of Groningen. Her research examines how the integration of digital technologies in Dutch governance impacts citizenship, with a focus on how these changes may lead to the social exclusion of marginalized populations.