Empowerment and protection: Building digital citizenship in the EU

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As digital technologies become an integral part of everyday life, from the home to public services, organisations from across society are looking for ways to promote positive citizenship fit for this new context.

In a recently-published non-paper, a working group gathering researchers, civil society organisations, think tanks and tech companies, including the Lisbon Council, Meta and the European Youth Forum, came together to devise five pillars on which a new concept of digital citizenship could rest.

Spanning well-being, media literacy, digital empowerment and opportunities, the pillars offer starting points for digital policymaking to both equip people with the capabilities to protect themselves in the online world and ensure that its benefits are equally distributed across society.
Digital citizenship: A new proposal for an inclusive future

Expanded education central to digital wellbeing, says practitioner

Is the EU’s AI Act Enabling Trustworthy AI? Testing Its Effectiveness With the Open Loop Initiative
A stakeholder-led initiative is pushing for a rethink of inclusion in the digital transformation, focusing on the idea of digital citizenship.

In a non-paper, the EU Digital Citizenship Working Group set out five pillars of digital citizenship, recommending policy actions in areas including technology, social engagement, human rights and democratic participation.

The coalition was formed in late 2020 and finished work on its non-paper, ‘Europeans Fit for the Digital Age’, last year. Its membership spans academia, business and civil society, including organisations such as Facebook’s parent company Meta, the Lisbon Council think tank, the NGO European Youth Forum and the Institute for Media Studies.

“For many people, words like ‘digital citizenship’ and ‘digital inclusion are just buzzwords,” said Mark Boris Andrijanič, Slovenia’s former digital minister, at an event held in Brussels earlier this month which gathered the working group’s steering committee. However, action is needed to address the fact that increasingly digitalised societies are not equally advantageous for all groups, he urged.

The working group similarly emphasises the differential impacts of the digital transition, which also outlines several critical challenges within the EU regarding digital citizenship.

Aside from inequalities, they also
include low quality of citizenship education, the limited reach of technological solutions, too great a dichotomy between on and offline aspects of digital citizenship and slow regulatory movement.

To address these and others, the group devised five pillars on which a revitalised vision of digital citizenship should stand: digital foundations, digital well-being; digital engagement and media literacy; digital empowerment; and digital opportunities.

Its digital citizenship concept focuses on minimising the possible harms of using these technologies and maximising their potential benefits.

Through the digital empowerment pillar, the working group promotes the idea that digital citizenship should include using the digital space for activism and political engagement, with an understanding of how digitalisation might shape democratic processes.

A focus on digital well-being is also at the core of the non-paper, with the group backing increased attention to ensuring that users are resilient and can build healthy and constructive online relationships with each other, an area in which they argue the EU is already “ahead of the curve” when it comes to policy focus.

In terms of digital foundations, the group argues that EU citizens must have strong digital capabilities to facilitate online safety and data protection but that “these foundational skills are lacking at an EU level”.

Brussels has focused on digital skills within its Digital Decade targets, intending to ensure that 80% of the EU’s population has basic digital skills by the end of the decade. However, observers have warned that progress towards this objective is lagging and that a significant ramping up of efforts will be needed if they are to be met.

The EU’s Digital Education Action Plan is a good start, according to the working group. Still, it adds that digital abilities should be broadened: “Skills should be acquired for life as opposed to work or school alone and should not be limited to formal education.”

Lack of flexibility and coordination within education are key obstacles to progress in this area. However, the non-paper notes under the Digital Opportunities pillar, to address weaknesses, its authors argue that a more holistic and less growth-focused understanding of digital skills and opportunities should be adopted.

The focus on digital skills comes alongside a push for media literacy and ensuring that the users of technology can evaluate the trustworthiness of online content and identify potential dis- or misinformation. Doing so while maintaining people’s right to free speech, the group says, will require partnerships between digital regulators and platforms.

Earlier this month, the Commission released a toolkit for educators looking to coach young people in developing skills for online critical thinking, training which will be similarly embedded into the Erasmus+ 2023 work programme.

Regarding tackling disinformation, platforms also have a role to play, noted Marisa Jiménez Martín, Director of Public Policy and Deputy Head of EU Affairs at the Brussels office of Meta, one of the organisations that contributed to the non-paper.

She argued that the spread of disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the need for platforms to step up and become more proactive in addressing these issues within the context of new technologies like the metaverse.

Speaking at the event in Brussels, Giuseppe Alessandro Veltri, a sociology professor at the University of Trento, noted that, while keeping the varied impacts of digitalisation on different groups in mind is essential, it was crucial to remember that everyone is vulnerable to some extent, particularly in the case of issues such as disinformation.

Further research, he argued, is needed to understand the impacts of various regulatory initiatives put forward to empower citizens online and these should not be considered automatic fix-alls to the critical issues of the digital age.

“Empowerment is needed”, he said, “but it’s not the only solution if it’s an alibi for not intervening where people are vulnerable.”
Expanded education central to digital wellbeing, says practitioner

By Molly Killeen | euractiv.com

Digital education must be broader than hard digital skills and break free of the online-offline divide, those working in digital wellbeing have said.

Building digital skills have become a core focus of EU policymakers in recent years, and much of this centres on equipping young people with the capabilities to navigate the digital age.

However, some working in digital wellbeing have called for an expanded conceptualisation of the skills needed to operate online and for greater attention to the roles of both teachers and families in encouraging their development.

Among them, a coalition of organisations has been calling for a more comprehensive look at digital citizenship. In a recently-published non-paper, the group – which includes Meta, the European Youth Forum, the Lisbon Council and some other research and civil society organisations – identifies five pillars on which the concept should be built, spanning digital foundations, wellbeing, engagement, empowerment and opportunities.

“Digitalisation is now all pervasive in the life of families and children, with pros and cons”, Elizabeth Gosme, director of COFACE Families Europe, one of the members of the working group, told EURACTIV.

However, when it comes to tackling issues that have arisen as a result of digitalisation, she said, the involvement of a much broader set
of actors than just families will be necessary to build resilience and digital skills.

Digital technologies have made caring for children all the more complicated, Gosme said, and ensuring that they are protected while also able to take full advantage of the opportunities provided by these technologies is a complex task, particularly when undertaken on top of existing caring responsibilities.

Building a more rounded concept of digital citizenship can help to support people in avoiding online harms and seizing the benefits that the digital space can provide, the non-paper argues, while also addressing some of the key challenges to digital citizenship.

One such obstacle, the coalition notes, is an online-offline separation, which treats the two spheres, and the citizenship skills required to operate in them successfully as wholly separate, jeopardizing the effectiveness of interventions.

“The dichotomy of offline-online doesn’t make sense so much anymore because digital is just part of our life these days,” noted Gosme, adding that reducing it should be a core focus of digital education initiatives.

“You need to go back offline to actually address the complexities of the online world,” she said. “That means emotional intelligence, social support, mental health support, respecting diversity, all these kinds of offline skills that everybody needs in life just for human connections.”

While digital components are increasingly present in education, there is a need for this to become more formalised, Gosme also argued.

“At some point,” she added, “digital technologies and digital citizenship need to enter the school curriculum more structurally and clearly because if you have the tools – such as software, internet connection and hardware – and you have the skills, that combination means you’re going to be less vulnerable online.”

“There is citizenship education anyway in most schools across Europe,” Gosme noted. “So it’s just about adding like a digital component, building on existing modules to make sure kids have the necessary skills before they enter the digital world.”

One such initiative to boost the teaching of digital capabilities came at EU-level last month with the Commission’s publication of a toolkit on digital literacy.

Developed by an expert group drawn from media, academia and civil society, the guidelines provide background, resources and best practices for educators in teaching skills, such as identifying mis- and disinformation and approaches to fact-checking.

Building and strengthening digital citizenship should not just be seen as the responsibility of teachers or parents, warned Gosme, adding that platforms should also be taking steps to incorporate citizenship and user safety.

“We’re very aware of how certain parts of internet services platforms function,” she said. “They are there to make money. They are not there for human rights. And so obviously, the business models are geared to ensure maximum presence online.”

When it comes to combatting the risks of online services, therefore, she said, “It’s also in the hands of the digital providers in how they design these products to, of course, have good business, but also ensure safety, citizenship and empowerment of the users, whether they’re kids or older persons or indeed anybody.”
AI is at the core of our work, helping to improve our existing products and serving as a foundation for innovative new applications. It has recently hit an inflection point in capturing the imagination of the general public and people are becoming more aware of its many applications and benefits.

By Norberto Andrade, Director AI Policy, and Antonella Zarra, AI Policy Program Manager at Meta.

As AI advances, so does its regulation. The European Union is leading the way with the upcoming AI Act, which has the potential to be a scene-setting piece of legislation aiming to introduce...
a common regulatory and legal framework encompassing all types of AI. Throughout its development process, it is critical that innovative companies of all sizes, especially startups, have their voices heard so we can help ensure that AI regulation is clear, inclusive and fosters greater innovation and competition.

How we tested the AI Act in Europe

In 2021, we launched Open Loop, a global initiative that brings together governments, tech businesses, academics, and civil society representatives to help develop forward-looking policies through experimental approaches such as policy prototyping. Through the Open Loop program focused on the AI Act, more than 50 European AI companies, SMEs and startups tested key requirements of the upcoming rules to see if they could be made clearer, more feasible, and effective. In this trial, European businesses identified a set of six recommendations that would help ensure the AI Act stays true to its objective of enabling the building and deployment of trustworthy AI. Here’s what they found:

1. Responsibilities between actors along the AI value chain should be better defined to reduce uncertainty: Roles and responsibilities, from providers to users, should work around the dynamic and interconnected relationships between all those involved in developing, deploying, and monitoring AI systems.

2. More guidance on risk assessments and data quality requirements is needed: Most participants said they would perform a risk assessment even if their AI systems are not high-risk by definition, but they found it challenging to anticipate how users or third parties might use the AI systems. This is especially true for SMEs, which would benefit from more guidance.

3. Data quality requirements should be realistic: Requiring “complete” and “error-free” datasets was considered unrealistic by Open Loop participants and they encourage using a “best effort” approach instead, as suggested by the European Parliament.

4. Reporting should be made clear and simple: Participants thought it was unclear how to interpret and comply with the technical documentation requirements and called for clearer guidance and templates. They also warned against setting out too-detailed rules that could create an excess of red tape.

5. Distinguishing different audiences for transparency requirements and ensuring enough qualified workers for human oversight of AI: European companies want to ensure that users of their AI systems are clearly informed about how to operate them. To ensure proper human oversight, businesses stressed that the level of detail of instructions and explanations varies greatly according to the target audience.

6. Maximise the potential of regulatory sandboxes to foster and strengthen innovation: Participants considered regulatory sandboxes an important mechanism for fostering innovation and strengthening compliance and felt they could be made more effective by legal certainty and a collaborative environment between the regulator and companies.

These suggestions show how the AI Act can be improved to benefit society and achieve its goals. It demonstrates how this experimental, multi-stakeholder policy prototyping approach can be applied to emerging technologies to help develop effective, evidence-based policies.

You can read the full report here.
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