Digital skills for European citizens and consumers

Professor Sonia Livingstone spoke today on 'Digital Skills for European Citizens and Consumers' at the opening workshop, "Digital Skills for a Digital Single Market" , chaired by Roberto Viola, Deputy Director-General of DG Connect, at the Digital Assembly in Riga. To follow the conference on Twitter use the hashtags #DA15eu and #DA15eskills, and to contribute to the conversation about digital issues in Europe see the European Commission's Digital4EU site. Sonia blogs at www.parenting.digital.

Citizens and consumers are the same people, but they have different needs, rights and interests. As **consumers**, people want reliable, trustworthy, easy-to-use services that deliver information or other products and services in a way that doesn't result in costly mistakes or damaging misjudgements. Europe has made progress in supporting skill learning, but it is still challenging for people to evaluate what's on offer, say, in terms of vital matters such as online educational, financial or health information.

It is less clear that policy and practice is supporting **citizens** in relation to the skills required for digital participation, partly because we have a less developed vision of how people could or should be learning, participating, creating or engaging as citizens in the digital age, partly because it is no simple matter to measure the skills required for such activities or to evaluate the programmes that seek to support them.

Participating as a citizen in the digital environment goes beyond being able to find, select, download or share content made by others. One must also be able to create content, curate content from others and engage in collaborative activities of commentary, deliberation and mobilisation.

Yet survey after survey reveal a big gap between the skills to download versus upload, to consume ready-made content versus making your own, to check the top ten sites in a search versus finding and contributing to specialist information, and so on.

Why is the skills gap still so large? Gaining digital skills, like many other kinds of skill, has been shown by research to face some key challenges:

- Skills are not generally acquired easily or automatically – skills worth having take effort to learn, and there are gradations in skill from novice to expert. The sometimes-lengthy process of learning skills means that simple campaigns or short-run interventions will rarely be enough. Relatedly, just leaving people to get on with it doesn't always mean that they gain the skills they need to progress – a lot of online activity remains rather basic and people do not always learn effectively through mere internet use. Skills must be learned as part of a pedagogic process. This is difficult and expensive to provide for adults who have finished school. It is notable that while most European countries have policies to teach children digital skills in school (though there are many problems in implementing this), far fewer have policies for on-the-job training for adults or stimulating informal learning for all.
- The resources available to motivate and support people to gain digital skills – again as for other skills – are generally unequally distributed, and heavily dependent on prior educational achievements. The risk is that generic population programmes will result in the rich getting richer so targeted interventions to the excluded (themselves a highly heterogeneous group) are vital, even though the 'hard to reach' are labelled this way for good reason.
- The effort of gaining skills is rarely undertaken just for the sake of it but must be **motivated by the desire to achieve certain goals**. People's desires are diverse and they also depend on what society has to offer. If there is little that speaks to you and your particular interests online or little response from

the influential institutions that affect your life – the outcome may be apathy, cynicism or resentment rather than motivation to learn more or try harder.

- Understanding the sources of motivation for interest-driven learning raises **questions of identity**. To commit to a significant learning process and to possess particular skills changes the kind of person you are, who you associate with, what pathways are open to you, how you are judged by others. Often we pay little attention to learners' identity or to providing the recognition and validation that could sustain their motivation to learn.
- Exercising skills also has a **safety and security dimension** – if it isn't safe to ride your bike on the streets, it won't matter how skilled you are, you just won't cycle to school or work. Similarly, parents worry about the safety of their children online and so restrict their opportunities to explore, make new friends and visit new places. Adults don't always trust the security of their financial transactions or of their personal data, leading them to prioritise caution over confident discovery of new skills and possibilities.
- Last, we can only learn what is learn-able. More like reading a book than riding a bike, digital literacy depends on legibility – and this is significantly a matter for industry provision, responsibility and design. People will continue to struggle to locate what they need online, evaluate search results, decide what to trust, create their own content or collaborate with others online so long as the technological interface is 'hard to read' or 'hard to use'. Absence of quality markers, lack of user-friendliness, financial scams and other abuses of trust, opaque and inflexible terms and conditions, difficulty of obtaining just-in-time advice, and a context of constant change – all these pose problems for what people can actually learn. They also limit the transferability of skills learned in one domain to another.

Looking forward, it's very welcome that the Digital Agenda for Europe recognises the importance of digital access, skills and engagement – and that it recognises that this importance extends beyond the economic imperative for a skilled IT workforce to include all citizens and for multiple purposes and outcomes.

Until now, it has been possible for some people to opt out, saying things like, 'I don't need to learn this as I can do what I want the old-fashioned way.' But increasingly, the digital environment is not only a means for us to do things as agents, but also a means by which others will do things to and for us, whether or not we are online and aware of their actions. Many have a digital footprint even though they post nothing about themselves. Nearly everyone is in a digital database with consequences for how the state and economy will treat them, whether or not they realise it. The 'smarter' our homes and cities become, the more complex they become (notwithstanding the commercial promise to make life simpler). What are the implications for citizens' and consumers' rights online and offline?

Figuring out how to fix things when they go wrong is becoming a highly skilled job. Whether it's protecting our rights to privacy or expression, knowledge or safety in a digital environment, arguing about such matters is currently occupying the best brains among Europe's technologists, lawyers and policy makers. Such reflections pose the interesting question of how much of a digital skill burden we can expect individual citizens and consumers to bear. Let alone how we are going to teach them – all of them – to shoulder it.

This post gives the views of the author, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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