"It's not your fault!": Aging and the dilemmas of literacy in a digital world

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As the world becomes increasingly digitally focused, Kim Sawchuk, Director of engAGE: Centre for Research on Aging, Concordia University, examines what this shift means for older adults trying to navigate media literacy

In an increasingly digital world, media literacy has become a critical life skill. Yet, having the skills to engage in this world can be challenging. In a recent workshop on navigating digital ecosystems, older participants spoke eloquently of the joys, frustrations, and threats they encountered in their daily digital lives. They recounted the difficulties they face in acquiring and maintaining the knowledge and skills needed to access this digital world safely and securely in media systems that are changing at a rapid pace.

The volatile digital media landscape

In recent decades, media have undergone significant changes. What was once a more straightforward ecosystem of television, radio, and print media has now become a web of interconnected digital platforms. Netflix, YouTube, TikTok, Spotify, Facebook, and Instagram now offer and distribute entertainment. Convergence is a crucial characteristic of our contemporary media environment. Traditional carriers, such as Bell Media, offer both infrastructure services (mobile and internet) and media content through streaming services. Apple, once a supplier of devices, now produces content. Some provide content for free, and others charge for premium services, while others rely on subscription models. These lucrative players offer diverse media content, both user-generated and professionally produced, often blurring the lines between content creators and consumers. As they serve as channels for communication, information, entertainment, and access to essential government services, the capacity to use them effectively is crucial.

Decoding in the digital age: The absence of transparency

Practicing media literacy today means more than simply understanding how to decode the messages that appear on our screens. In this complex system, our 'interactions' generate information – valuable data – that is fed back to service providers, and that may be shared with third-party providers. These are not inert systems that provide access: each movement we make within this environment can be tracked and traced. Algorithmic recommendations, search engine results, and data-driven ads are content created by powerful digital systems based on user behavior but also based on data on our identities, including our age.

Participating in these systems, even if one is careful, may mean taking the risk of identity theft or data breaches by third-party actors, a tale we have heard all too often and which poses specific challenges for older digital media users, particularly those living off fixed incomes after retirement, in a world where black-boxed algorithms play a powerful role in determining what we see, understanding how those systems work would seem to be essential. Most companies do not reveal how their algorithms work. These systems are not "transparent" or "opaque," as another workshop participant commented. As one older participant asked in our workshop on this system: "Are we using it, or is it using us?" Teaching digital media literacy to older adults in this context must now account for the ambiguous nature of these interactions.

Layers of digital media literacy knowledge

Critical media literacy today requires not only the ability to decode the message but also a myriad of decisions faced and knowledge required.

- Technical systems and infrastructural knowledge: Engaging in this environment requires some understanding of the infrastructure underlying digital media systems and how different infrastructures (Wi-Fi, cellular data, or Bluetooth) in different locations – rural or urban – can affect access to communication.
- Service decisions: Choices are made about which carriers or service providers to engage with (Bell, Rogers, or Telus), what they provide, and at what cost. This includes a range of knowledge: knowing how to maximize device usage, understanding service agreements, and monitoring associated costs.
- Device decisions: Knowing how to choose the right device for specific tasks and manage updates is rarely straightforward. Media literacy in the digital world requires understanding what device is best for your needs, which may themselves change, how different devices work, how they are interconnected, and the tasks they can accomplish. It involves learning new gestures (like swiping and scrolling), uninstalling, uninstalling, upgrading, and maintaining devices.
- Content decisions: Participants in our workshops had questions about how to find, access, and assess online content. Knowing where to find the content you want is important, but so is understanding where that content comes from and whether it is reliable. If one creates content, how do you manage the accumulation of your digital data (photos, music, documents)? How are they deleted, shared, or stored to ensure that they are available for future generations or protected from prying eyes?
- Security and privacy decisions: Keeping track of secure passwords, managing privacy settings, and staying alert to potential security breaches are all new requirements for engaging in current digital media. Once you access content or sign up for a service, how do you protect your personal data? How do you manage subscriptions and track them, especially if you are invited to try something for free? How do you protect yourself from cyber threats?

Digital media literacy as a continuous process

Living and aging in the digital world presents unique challenges for users of all ages. It is a continuous task of constant and continuous and demanding upkeep, rather than a one-time achievement that requires troubleshooting, understanding new systems, and the injunction to keep up. The interconnected and often opaque nature of digital media systems means that even experienced users struggle at different moments. From understanding how algorithms shape the content we see to navigating the technical complexities of digital devices, becoming media literate is a multifaceted, demanding process that all too often places the onus back on us as individuals.

These difficulties are not personal failings or simply a question of age. They are the result of the complexity and opacity of today's digital media systems, which on the surface seem so easy and convenient yet are extremely demanding. Ultimately, "It's Not Your Fault" serves as a reminder that becoming digitally literate is a challenge shared by all and that requires collective solutions.

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