

Protecting the public from abusive AI generated content.

Policy Breakfast '[Protecting the public from abusive AI-generated content](#)' on  
**Wednesday at 8:00** at the **European Parliament**

Introduction from Jos Bertrand, president ESO – PES seniors.

Happy to be here, as a representative of a European seniors' organization. I am the President of ESO, the seniors' network of the PES. I am also active in a Belgian seniors' organization S-Plus, and member of the Flemish Seniors' Council, which advises the political authorities on seniors' policy.

I want to start with an introductive consideration: Often older persons are referred to as a group of people who are getting older, becoming dependent, and a cost for healthcare and care. First of all, this view deserves to be nuanced: older persons are an important part of society, a very diverse group, with very different needs. But more fundamentally, senior citizens should no longer to be seen as “poor” dependent people, but as full-citizens who – just like others – have rights and must therefore also have access to the enjoyment of those rights. **As senior-organization, we are pleading for a right based approach of older generations.**

That is the first point, I will discuss with you.

The fact that this is a very diverse group does not alter the fact that many older citizens, just like lesser privileged groups in society, including many young people, disadvantaged persons, experience big **problems in the digital world**: they are more than other groups, the victims of the misuse of digital applications, including artificial intelligence **and have problems with access to services, allowances, benefits linked to fundamental rights.**

In this regard, the basic question we all need to ask ourselves is: **how can digital tools and new insights and achievements such as artificial intelligence serve citizens and society? and not, the other way around.**

Indeed, digital applications, artificial intelligence, have great opportunities, and this is evident in healthcare, for example, but also entails great dangers in first place of exclusion from access to rights and services and growing dependency. The abolition of physical counters at service providers in healthcare, in care, and certainly in the financial sector means that many older citizens simply no longer have access to their rights to reimbursement for certain care, f.e. or to independent management of their own finances. They need specific aid in this perspective.

Secondly, older persons, but not only them, are less familiar with the new digital tools and therefore more vulnerable to fraudulent actors and criminals. Senior citizens are more often than others the victim of phishing and fraudulent practices. When this type of fraud is detected, there is a real need for face -to -face help and support and that is not always available.

Fundamentally, **we advocate with ESO to make face -to -face services mandatory as the first access platform – by default – in the provision of services to the general public.** And we are not alone in this. At the end of January, a great number of European NGOs working with more vulnerable people, launches a call to the European Commission in this sense.

As this is not the case, and many people are confronted with problems and in order to address this problem, local authorities, but also volunteer organisations, have focused on services that help people with problems with digital resources personally. These types of initiatives, which – in mine country -we call “digital assistants” “digital doctors” or “digital cafés”, must also be further developed and, above

all, financially supported. **Thus, it seems us quite obvious that the sector who benefit from digitalisation also contributes to solve these problems.** Indeed, it cannot be accepted that large companies, f.e. in the financial sector, make big profits by rationalising and digitalising their services and that public authority (mostly local governments) and the taxpayers, has to pay for the help for people who then are abandoned by them.

As senior citizens' organizations, **we are also very concerned about possible unethical use and the dangers to the functioning of our democracy.**

That's mine second issue for our discussion.

It is about the relation between facial recognition and the right to privacy, or the discriminatory use of algorithms in job applications, credit assessments, etc. for example the Dutch child benefit scandal, a few years ago, are important and dramatic examples of this.

We can mention the spread of fake news and deepfakes and the misleading of public opinion.

I also point the dependence from big economical interest groups, this can range from experts/monopolies, but also from national and private interests.

How can we, as democratic open societies, deal with these challenges?

**This is not just a question of regulation, although it is indispensable.**

But more important than the question of regulation is the question of priorities, my initial question: **how can digitalization, how can artificial intelligence be used to the benefit of society? Who benefits from what?**

An answer to this question implies a great involvement of the public authority and, via the government, the civil society, the organised citizens. This is particularly difficult in a sector that has a very high level

of technicality, but even especially for that reason so important. Digital tools are developed by experts who often have no feeling with the problems that the application poses for the user, the "normal" citizens. It is therefore advisable to look for feedback from the grassroots, the basis of society.

As far as regulation is concerned, I also strongly advocate the involvement of civil society and end-users, the citizens, in preparation, monitoring and enforcement of regulation. **Why not consider a tripartite dialogue between civil society, industry and public authority as already exist in social-economic and financial (monetary) politics?** Civil society have more contact with the reality at the grassroots than experts and can point out the weaknesses and vulnerabilities. They represent the interest off the broader society. For example: the European Accessibility Act provides a number of legal guidelines for the accessibility of digital tools, but an essential element is missing, and that is an answer to the question: "Where can I find personal help, face-to-face, if I can't solve the problem?" A second example: in Belgium we can forward "suspicious emails" to a government service called "save-on-web"... If you do so, you receive an anonymous email "no replay". But otherwise, no more explanation, impossible to put questions... "no replay" and that is in many cases, what's going wrong.

A second problem is the enforcement of the regulation. How can the respect from the regulation can be monitored and how the regulation can be enforced. For older persons it mains the same as before: to whom can I address, if the regulation is not applied? **The citizens concerned must be able to report abuse, non-application of legislation and enforce the application in a simple manner.** But we need also more systematic information and monitoring of complaints, misuses, difficulties. And non-application, misuse should be sanctioned...

At least, I would also like to **warn against overemphasizing the role of “learning digital skills or digital education”**. Not everything can be done through “education”. With age, the speed of adaptation to change already decreases, many people simply do not have access to education. Moreover, artificial intelligence goes very deeply into human relations, where trust and feelings, play a role; it’s affected our way of thinking and sharing reality.

In this context, and in light of the problems with social media and the introduction of artificial intelligence and the major challenges for our democratic model of society, **I would like plaid for a indebt reflection on what we – in a recent past - used to call “citizenship education” and “popular education”, and that is even – if not more - important as learning digital skills**. Faced with the digital revolution and the rise of artificial intelligence, it seems really urgent to me to “educate men and women to take charge of themselves, to become agents of their curiosity, to become subjects in a continuous process of searching for the revelation of the “why” of things and facts. That is the essence of “personal or popular education”.

Also in this sector, public authorities (as the European Commission), together with stakeholders and civil society, could also take on important responsibility.