

### ***'Digital literacy': the central cultural technique of the 21st century***

Today in all social areas, extensive digital skills are a key qualification. Like reading, writing and arithmetic, information and communication technologies (ICT), above all the internet, represent a *cultural technique*. According to my definition, *digital literacy* comprises definite *technical competences* and *media competence* in the broadest sense. It includes the ability to assess how and where information can be found. In addition, it includes the ability to develop the use of information and the competence to classify and interpret its quality. Digital literacy implies the ability to develop the resources available in one's surroundings and to be in the position to inform oneself about current developments within those surroundings with the help of ICT. Extensive digital skills enhance the chances of finding a job even in less qualified fields of endeavour, expand the possibilities of using state and private services, create equal opportunity in training and increase participation in public life.

In practice, however, many people have no or only deficient digital skills. Increasingly, this represents a social and political criterion of exclusion running along the lines of age, sex, education, economic position, place of residence, cultural background and linguistic competence. The development of digital skills at regional, national and supra-national levels therefore means nothing less than to counteract a *digital split*<sup>1</sup> in society. The acquisition of digital literacy thus constitutes a key task for all members and institutions of a knowledge society.

For this reason, governments and NGO's have set the *life-long learning* of digital skills on their agenda as a principal goal. An important upshot of this has been new policies with respect to ICT. So as to intensify the opportunities of social participation for as many people as possible, many ICT initiatives and measures<sup>2</sup> have been established. These are directed to people disadvantaged by the digital split: young people, older people, women, immigrants, the unemployed and people with little or no education. A central instrument intended to lead to the broader social development of digital literacy is *eLearning*. At the same time, the participating actors, experts from government, NGO's, schools, universities, communities and businesses, have recognised that measures for *digital integration* cannot be restricted to *only* eLearning. Important here is the knowledge that the social and cultural background of the learner plays a central role in learning contexts. Digital integration therefore must include not only the communication of digital techniques and skills, but also the reflection on and taking into account of social and cultural factors. In addition to teaching key digital qualifications, eLearning must also foster the development of social and cultural skills.

With respect to women, young and older people, considerable success has been achieved so far in the development of digital literacy<sup>3</sup>. The close linking of subject matter with the learner's surroundings has proven to be a successful strategy. It has been shown that the learner's motivation to acquire digital skills develops only when he or she recognises a personal use in their acquisition. Thus measures to promote digital integration must also communicate those competences which enable the learner to assess the advantages of digital literacy. A further factor in the success of such measures concerns the dynamics and flexibility of their design and realisation. Projects must be capable of development and able to take into account the motivation and wishes of participants. An essential aspect of this flexibility is the continuous reflection upon and further development of concepts of applied learning and communication. The inclusion of *cultural brokers* such as social workers, teachers, local politicians and artists has been a demonstrably successful approach in ICT measures. These cultural brokers are important counsellors and mediators in their given surroundings and are therefore in an especially good position to prepare and set in motion the process of digital integration.

Nevertheless, there are great problems in promoting the digital integration of certain social groups. These concern above all people with multiple disadvantages such as older immigrants, young people from areas with weak social infra-structures, and people in less qualified fields of endeavour. A major obstacle for these groups is the frequently lacking learning skills. Successful programmes for digital integration can therefore be developed only

by creating contexts of learning which focus on 'learning to learn'. Further important factors that should enter into the teaching concept are linguistic barriers and the socio-cultural context of the learner. A better knowledge of these factors is inevitably linked to the intensification of accompanying social scientific research. Whereas previous studies<sup>4</sup> have investigated the introduction of ICT measures at the macro-level, the micro-level on the other hand has been neglected. Few studies<sup>5</sup> focus on the investigation of local realities, yet only this approach can generate knowledge about the important social and cultural background of the learners.

In conclusion, I would like to stress again that digital literacy is a cultural technique which represents a central tool for social, cultural and political integration. It is a key qualification for all members of society and enables them to engage in *active citizenship*. Active citizenship and participation in the democratic knowledge society is therefore closely bound up with digital literacy. This connection can unfold its positive effect at regional, national and European levels only when digital literacy is so conceived as to include social, cultural and political factors. A progressing European process of unification will increasingly demand extensive (digital) skills of the citizens of Europe. Action at all levels of political decision is therefore necessary to ensure and advance the success of this process. The following recommendations for action are based on my research and expertise in the area of digital integration:

- Measures for the promotion of digital integration, such as the eLearning programme or community projects, should be permanently institutionalised and the period during which they receive support should be made flexible. Successful measures should be guaranteed unhindered renewal of support.
- People in fields of endeavour that presuppose little or no education, the socially disadvantaged and immigrants need measures carefully designed for the specific target group (e.g., PC courses in several languages, courses on learning to research information, courses on 'learning to learn'). But also important is the expansion of public availability (public places of access attended by mentors, PC and internet meeting places).
- Measures should be made available not only at classical educational institutions such as schools and universities, but also within the learner's everyday surroundings. An intensification of community projects, such as have been supported in Germany by the European Social Fund (ESF), is urgently needed. *Micro-projects for the promotion of digital integration* within the ESF should also be intensified. In addition to already existing European programmes, further extensive programmes of action for the promotion of *digital integration* should be established.
- In order to enhance digital integration, closer co-operation between the social sciences, politics and practice is urgently needed. This should include the enhancement of information management and the acceleration of applied research. In addition, intensification of professional research into evaluation is necessary in order to make the allocation of scarce resources more effective.

(Translated by Jonathan Uhlaner)

<sup>1</sup> Information about the 'digital split', see: [ <http://www.digitaldividenetwork.org/content/sections/index.cfm?key=2> ].

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Federal German Internet Project 'Media@Komm' [ <http://www.mediakomm.net/index.phtml> ]; German Foundation 'Digitale Chancen' [ <http://www.digitale-chancen.de> ]; Local Digital Integration Project 'buerger-gehen-online' [ <http://www.buerger-gehen-online.de> ], Local ICT-Project for Senior Citizens 'Seniorenprojekt Münster' [ <http://www.senioren-migranten.de> ]; Local Youth Project 'Lokal-Global' [ <http://www.lokal-global.de> ]; Digital Integration Project 'Start und Klick' [ <http://www.start-und-klick.de> ].

<sup>3</sup> E.g. in the USA "the Center for Digital Literacy (CDL) at Syracuse University, supports collaborative research and development projects related to understanding the impact of information, technology and media literacies on children and adults in today's technology-intensive society" [ <http://digital-literacy.syr.edu/> ].

<sup>4</sup> E.g., accompanying research of the 'Federal German Project Media@Komm' conducted by the German Institute for Urban Studies (Difu) and others [ <http://www.erfolgsmodell.mediakomm.net> ].

<sup>5</sup> E.g., the international research project 'Netculture and Ethnic Identity' [ <http://www.s-hb.de/~netculture> ]; 'The digital gap as a challenge for local communities' [ [http://www.mediakomm.net/documents/kongress/esslingen/kubicek\\_en.pdf](http://www.mediakomm.net/documents/kongress/esslingen/kubicek_en.pdf) ]; Study 'Lebenswelten Deutschtürken 2002' [ <http://www.deuschtuerken2002.de> ].