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Digital Media Use of Older Adults in Mureş County, Romania

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Abstract. This paper analyses the media practices of older adults from Mureş County (village and small town). The first part of this paper examines the integration of digital media into current society and everyday life along with the characteristics of the knowledge and skill acquisition related to digital media. The second half, grounded on empirical qualitative data, offers insight into the digital media practices of older people in Mureş County, Romania, as well as into their opportunities and the contexts regarding the knowledge and skill acquisition necessary for the use of digital media. The paper is based on an exploratory qualitative research aimed at offering insight into the Romanian situation, identifying the obstacles to the digital media use of the older people living in rural areas, and laying the groundwork for a more extended study.

Keywords: older adults, digital media, digital inequality, digital practices, digital skills, Romania

Introduction

The social embeddedness of digital media does not implicitly mean the development and spread of useful and effective user practices among all social segments. The regular use of digital media and the development of beneficial digital practices are more frequent among socio-economically middle- and upper-class people living in urban settings. Studies support that young adults and families with children are more likely to integrate digital media use into their daily practice. Older adults and adults living in rural areas are represented

in greater proportion among disadvantaged users, and this digital backwardness is even greater among lower education groups and people in their last stage of life (Hofer–Hargittai–Büchi–Seifert, 2019; Helsper, 2012).

This paper[1] analyses the media use of older adults from Mureş County (village and small-town), i.e. their individual and collective use of various smart devices and their new-media-based practices, with particular focus on qualitative aspects, while also mapping the effects (efficiency and satisfaction) of digital practices on various areas of life (Hofer–Hargittai–Büchi–Seifert, 2019).

The paper is based on an exploratory qualitative research aimed at offering insight into the Romanian situation, identifying the obstacles to the digital media use of the older people living in rural areas, and laying the groundwork for a more extended study. During this research, we asked 49 older people regarding their digital media usage practices and conducted semi-structured interviews with 45 of them. Their selection was based on a combination between the reliance on the available subjects and specialist sampling. Of the 45 people interviewed in the study, 28 respondents were female and 17 were male; 11 of the subjects live in rural and 34 of them in urban areas. The interviews were conducted in January and February 2018.

Based on the available literature on the subject, the first part of the paper examines the integration of digital media into our current society and everyday life along with the characteristics of the knowledge and skill acquisition related to digital media. The second half, grounded on empirical qualitative data, offers insight into the digital media usage practices of older people in Mureş County, Romania, as well as into their opportunities and the contexts regarding the knowledge and skill acquisition necessary for the use of digital media.

1. Aging in the Information Society

The mapping of the digital practices of older people and, if necessary, helping them catch up with the requirements of information society are key issues of the aging Europe (Hofer–Hargittai–Büchi–Seifert, 2019). Eurostat statistics show that the EU is characterized by the gradual aging of the population. According to statistical forecasts, the percentage of older people (65+) is projected to increase from 18.5% to 28.7% by 2080. These demographic changes will turn the age pyramid upside down, representing a serious provocation both for the entire population and for the elderly themselves. The European Union, including Romania, has to face

1 The study is based on the research conducted as part of the Domus group project *Digital Media and Social Diversity: The Digital Literacy of Various Social Groups* (2017–2018) and was written in the framework of the project *Parallel Ruralities. Current (Existential) Forms of Rurality in Four Transylvanian Microregions* (K 120712), of the National Research, Development and Innovation Office.

the specific problem of the ageing population, which significantly affects every aspect of life: the social care system, the occupational structure, intergenerational communication, and the management of intergenerational/social tensions (see Molnár, 2010: 49).

The accumulation of losses – such as exclusion from the active roles in society, the breakdown of relationships and, not least, declining health – is characteristic of the older generation (Hofer–Hargittai–Büchi–Seifert, 2019). Hence, digital media represents a resource that provides an opportunity for reducing the losses accumulated by older people.

2. The Social Integration of Digital Media

"The ongoing invasion of digital media" (Szijártó, 2015: 43) and the overflow of digital device use have directed attention towards the issue of acquiring, implementing, and domesticating digital media. What is the significance of certain technologies from the perspective of the user? What kind of usage practices are developed by individuals and communities as a result of the – slower- or faster-paced – integration of these new devices into our living space?

Roger Silverstone was among the pioneers of media studies conducted from an ethnographic stance. He examined the ways in which new media are incorporated into the homes, how they become part of everyday practices and turn into instruments of social actions (see Szijártó, 2015: 43).

In his study presenting the conceptual framework to be employed in the research on Generation Z, Zsolt Szijártó mentions the "increasing media determination – the all-pervading mediatization – of everyday reality". "Our everyday life has become unimaginable without the constant use of digital media" (Szijártó, 2015: 35). "The presence of media devices and contents – mediatization – has become an everyday phenomenon: several media are present in the most varied contexts of everyday life." In fact, digital technology and new media have become such an organic part of everyday life and so embedded in our everyday practices that one could almost say that "it is the medialess world itself that has become fully utopian" (Szijártó, 2015: 35).

According to Gábor Szécsi, "the use of new communication technologies (computer, mobile phone, etc.), besides becoming the source of new forms of community, also creates a hitherto unknown system of relationships, the synthesis of different community types" (Szécsi, 2013: 7). This is the source for the emergence of the "mediatized communities" "through which the Internet or mobile phone user can successfully connect at the same time to the global informational flow and cultivate stronger and more conscious attachment to the local social groups considered particularly important" (ibid.).

However, Zsolt Szijártó also points out in his above-cited paper that "within the global trend of mediatization, there are significant differences between social groups regarding their media use" (Szijártó, 2015: 35). While the computer and the Internet represents the natural environment for the socialization of younger people, who "are native speakers of the digital language of the computers, video games and the Internet", the members of previous generations – and especially older people –, who may be dubbed as "digital immigrants", speak this language "with a certain 'accent' which reveals that they do not completely dominate this idiom" (Szijártó, 2015: 36). In this new media environment, the latter users apply the "grammars" and "genres" of the former media periods along with the practices and interpretations associated with them.

The use of digital media has also become embedded into the everyday life of the Romanian society with the widespread penetration of the Internet. However, there is no uniform and homogeneous use as specific social and cultural models have been developed for digital media use, influenced by factors both on the individual level (motivational and situational) and the group (cultural) as well as the social level (socio-economic situation) (Livingstone et al., 2015: 10).

In Romania (as well), we have a unique situation of the implementation of the information society. According to the 2016 Eurostat data, of the 28 EU Member States, the percentage of the non-Internet-using population is 30% compared to the 14% EU average. On average, 71% of the population uses the Internet on a daily basis in the 28 EU Member States, while the proportion of daily Internet users is only 42% in Romania. While 12% of the population has advanced knowledge regarding Internet use in the 28 EU Member States, the corresponding rate is only 5% in Romania. Globally, the statistics reflect that the digital inequalities created at the level of the EU affect Romania even more seriously.

In every society, there are groups with attitudes, value systems, world views, and behavioural patterns that support change. Thus, a gap is created between the subgroups who have already experienced the change and the stagnating social groups or the groups who are slower in mastering the new technology. Older people represent a social group that is falling behind in adapting the digital media and/or in its familiarization with it (Schreurs K.–Quan-Haase A.–Martin K., 2017). In Romania, according to the 2015 statistical data (TEMPO Online, 2015), 40% of the households with householders between the ages of 65 and 74 have a computer, while the same proportion is only 19.6% for households with householders above the age of 75. Internet connection is present in 38.7% of the households with householders aged 65 to 74 and in 18.6% of those with householders above 75.

Rural communities can also traditionally be included among the late majority (the last 34%) or among the laggards (the last 16%) when it comes to applying innovations (Rogers E., 2003). The results of Romanian studies also indicate that,

along with age, education, and occupation, the living environment is also an important determinant regarding the access to digital devices (see Tufa, 2010). The urban–rural computer access ratio is 3:1 and as high as 5:1 for Internet access (Tufa, 2010: 11). In 2015, 72.2% of the urban and 48.4% of the rural population had a computer in their household, while 71.9% of the Romanian urban population and 46.6% of the rural population had Internet access (TEMPO Online, 2015).

Cultural norms, values, attitudes, and rituals are structured into world views, and their characteristics determine the success of the local communities' adaptation to digital media and, more generally, to innovation. Hermann Bausinger has previously shown that the perception of technology has for centuries been mainly characterized by mistrust in rural (i.e. in many respects disadvantaged and less educated) environments, often coupled with the demonization and mystification of machines (see Bausinger, 1995). This attitude can also be noted – especially among older people – regarding digital media devices. As Árpád Rab noted in one of his studies, the attitude of older people towards digital media devices is currently characterized by aversion and radical opinions, most often manifested in practice as reluctance and rejection (Rab, 2009: 54). Due to their lack of understanding the operating principle of the computer, the elderly often "ensoul" it, e.g. by calling it "capricious".

Nevertheless, these carefully kept and fearfully used devices have found their way into their personal living spaces during the past one and a half decades, becoming the foundation for specific practices and even the objects of reflection by creating a characteristic narrative basis around their use and presenting their "nature". Through the domestication of digital media (i.e. the familiarization process), these devices are involved in navigating the world, structure the space of the home, contribute to filling time, and shape social relations.

In the case of older people, due to the narrowing of the living space and to social relations, the importance of certain local registers and commemorative rituals increases (cf. Keszeg, 2009: 124). At the same time, digital media use becomes increasingly widespread (e.g. mobile phones and Facebook) since it can, to a certain degree, widen this narrowed living space and repair the defective social network. Hence, the older generations use digital technologies as a kind of prosthesis.

The use of new media devices among the elderly is often motivated by need and necessity, with the cultivation of family connections as a stronger motivational factor than increasing personal benefits and satisfaction, which may be part of the reason why this device use has an intense emotional motivation and is strongly ritualized and characterized by the combination between admiration and "the dread of technology". Usage practices are formed in the context of these two opposed processes (the need of communication, which increases the frequency of use, and the fear of the new media, which reduces it).

3. Inequalities in the Social Integration of Digital Media

We are currently witnessing the dynamic development of information society, the accelerating generational change of hardware and software, and the widening spread of Internet access. These tendencies are present both in developed and developing countries (Correa–Pavez, 2016). All this widens the rural–urban gap even more, and – although several countries are making significant efforts to stimulate Internet access in rural communities – the degree of acceptance and use is not identical in rural and urban areas (ibid.). The same tendency and a similar knowledge gap can also be detected on the basis of the comparison between the digital competence of the younger and of the older generation (Van Volkom–Stapley–Amaturo, 2014).

The analysis of the social use of digital media and its effect upon different areas of life is rooted in the discourse related to the spread of the Internet (Rogers, 2003) and to the development of the digital gap (Hargittai, 2001; Van Dijk, 2005; Van Deursen–Helsper, 2017). Digital inequality was attributed to access difficulties (first-level digital divide). However, very soon, it became clear that there are significant differences in use even among people having Internet access (second-level digital divide). Currently, the centre of attention is on the efficiency and usefulness of Internet use (third-level digital divide). According to the studies, there is a clear relationship between digital capabilities, digital practices, and usage results (Hofer–Hargittai–Büchi–Seifert, 2019). One of the most important research questions is to what extent the characteristics of digital practices and the level of digital skills contribute to efficiency and satisfaction in the various areas of everyday life (Van Deursen–Helsper, 2017; Hofer–Hargittai–Büchi–Seifert, 2019).

4. The Circumstances of Acquiring Knowledge of Digital Media and Digital Skills

Studies are consistent in showing that digital literacy goes beyond the use of digital devices and even beyond acquiring and possessing the necessary (technical) knowledge. The important thing is how this knowledge is integrated into everyday practices. This latter aspect is simultaneously "digital behaviour, socio-cultural practice, and identity" (ELINET, 2016). The differences between users appear in the form of such different behaviours, practices, and identities that are shaped by the digital skills, attitudes, values, and knowledge of the users. It also contains several social and cultural patterns influencing everyday life in different ways – according to the quality, goal, and intensity of digital activities –, forming and operating a variety of online identities (Powell, 2007). Different

social groups and even individuals belonging to the same group may have very different access levels, with value creation and the merely reproductive use at the two extremes (Rab, 2009: 50).

Digital literacy is thus not merely a question of device use and possession but a social fact. It is not only the analysis of produced and consumed content and of its supporting infrastructure that is important from a research perspective but primarily the acceptance of the digital media, the fact of the use, its motivations, and, finally, its social effect or results. Thus, not only the goals and ways of digital media use are worth analysing but also the related opinions of the users, the extent to which they consider it useful, the efforts needed to operate it, and the satisfaction with the achieved results since all these factors greatly influence usage practices (Davis et al., 1989; Venkatesh–Davis, 2000; Venkatesh et al., 2012).

Older people often lack the necessary knowledge regarding digital media and its possibilities of use. Hence, they are wary of new media, which leads to the avoidance of media use (Hofer–Hargittai–Büchi–Seifert, 2019).

At the same time, media ethnographers emphasize that it is worth considering not only how new media reshapes our everyday lives but also the ways in which new media is built into the everyday practices of different user groups and is ultimately influenced and reshaped during its collective use (Miller et al., 2016).

5. The Integration of Digital Media Use into the Everyday Lives of Elderly People Living in Mureş County, Romania

The Internet and the various digital devices are used primarily for staying in touch with the family/friends, strengthening communication, and/or restoring the damaged face-to-face communication: "nowadays, it's enough to tell them on the phone that we're fine or to send them pictures on Facebook, so they can see how we look like" (A56). This practice has become generalized especially in the case of families whose younger generations have moved away from the settlement or are working abroad, and so they can only come to visit for more or less lengthy periods only a couple times a year. As an interviewee stated:

> Oh, we talk daily with the kids. Why? If we can't talk, we have quite a bad day indeed. We sometimes talk with our friends as well, but it is especially important to talk with my children. I take great comfort in knowing that they are well, that all the family is well, and that the grandchildren are alright, and, naturally, they are also interested in how we are doing. As for our friends and relatives, we talk with them maybe once a month or on special occasions, such as on birthdays, name days, mostly on occasions such as holidays.

The same interviewee stated that: "our computer is a used one, but it meets our needs. Our son gave it to us as a gift because he bought a new one. He also talked us into getting an Internet connection so we can more easily access information, read newspapers, and keep in touch with friends who live abroad..." (A 54).

Because in the early 2000s international phone calls were quite expensive in Romania, family members have become specialized in using various Internet-based free services, primarily Skype in the early days, followed more recently by Facebook Messenger.

In addition to keeping in touch, our interview subjects most often mentioned reading the news and – the majority of the women – cookery recipes as their regular online activities.

In young families, online videos and games designed for tablets and smartphones are increasingly widespread even among 2- and 3-year-old children. In order to ensure their availability to their visiting grandchildren, a growing number of elderly people decide to get Internet subscriptions and to buy tablet devices. These older adults often participate as passive viewers in the use of digital media, as if watching over the shoulder of their grandkids: "when my grandson is with us, and my husband puts on a game for him on the tablet, then I sit down next to him as an assistant, and, of course, I enjoy him having fun. But only as a spectator" (A 54).

These users later gradually become independent in their use of the device under the supervision of the grandkids. From the perspective of Internet use, one can observe the phenomenon of reverse socialization: many older adults may be considered "disciples" of their grandchildren.

The interviews reveal that there is a certain distribution of functions in the domain of the use of the various digital devices: they watch television especially in the evening, and the TV serves entertainment purposes, while the laptop and the smartphone are used primarily for connection and communication. One of the interviewees explicitly stated this state of affairs: "So, let's start with the television. It fills my leisure time, or rather provides my evening entertainment, while the laptop is used for Facebook and for keeping in touch, and the phone is, of course, for keeping in touch as well" (A 40). It should also be mentioned that in the case of the elderly the various digital devices and media are used simultaneously and almost equally. The interviewees are almost without exception television viewers, radio listeners, and Internet users as well. Furthermore, they also read newspapers and novels. Hence, the general tendency described as "cannibalization" in the scholarly literature is absent in this setting (cf. Fehér, 2016: 22).

Among the older adults who count as regular Internet users, the use of social media for entertainment and leisure purposes is dominant. The reasons for this can be identified as follows: (1) older people do not know what to do with the

spare time created as a result of their retirement or due to abandoning agricultural and the more intensive backyard and garden work, (2) the encouragement and the expectations of their children and their grandchildren (in order to be able to play with their grandchildren, they have to be able to become involved in their activities; hence, they have to keep up with them also in terms of media use).[2]

Digital devices also play an important role in health preservation[3] and in creating a sense of security in the case of older people living alone. The latter objective is achieved by the mobile phone, which makes it possible to immediately call for help in case of trouble or feeling sick. Accordingly, the phone is kept right next to the bed overnight (on the bedside cupboard, nightstand, or windowsill).

The importance of the phone for creating a feeling of security is well illustrated by the following interview fragment:

> The phone battery died the other day, and I didn't know what to do, so I went out front to stop any passer-by for help. It was almost dark, and I didn't know what to do until the next morning if I get sick, as my neighbours had already gone to bed. But one of my cousins, who lives down there, went past in her car, and I stopped her and explained that I'm in trouble with my phone. So, Jóska, her husband, told me to plug it in to recharge it. (A 62)

There are also cases in which, in addition to providing entertainment, the Internet and social media helps religious life: "I use Facebook for looking up my friends, and I also use YouTube, mostly for listening to Protestant sermons, for example, those of Kálmán Cseri and Miklós Bódis, as well as for listening to and watching the Reformed men's choir. This is what I like" (A 39).[4]

The older adults included in our study did not use digital media either for economic, political, or cultural purposes or for becoming involved in activities taking place on public or semi-public platforms (e.g. job search, financial operations, voting, enforcement of civil rights, involvement in online communities, etc.).

2 This is suggested, e.g., by the following interview fragment: "At first, I was not very impressed, but we also thought of the fact that our grandchildren will be able to watch cartoons and children's movies when visiting us…" (A 54).

3 This is to say that they use the Internet to search for remedies and prescriptions for various illnesses or the side effects of medications and instructions for the use of medicinal products: "I sometimes search for drugs, prescriptions… things like that. Or, if I don't understand the meaning of a word, I search for its meaning…" (A 54); or: "we have checked out the recipes, the health articles" (A 45).

4 This interviewee has also mentioned religious programmes among her favourite television shows.

6. Characteristics of the Digital Media Use of Older People Living in Mureş County, Romania

The various researches conducted in European rural and urban areas indicate that the members of the older generations who are already Internet users are, for the most part, using it daily/weekly (Rab, 2009). This is also confirmed by our own study.

The use of digital devices among the elderly is characterized by strong ritualization and by the mechanical repetition of the specific sequence of actions. The ritual character of the device use is primarily due to the fact that older adults do not understand the functioning of the device, and the performance of certain operations becomes thus the mechanical repetition of a sequence of actions scribbled down on a note paper that is kept near the computer. One of our interviewees described this as follows:

> My keyboard is not Hungarian. So, I have it written down where the question mark and the accented vowels are… I have it all written down. I am starting to remember quite well where the accented vowels are on the keyboard, but I am still having some difficulties with the less common ones such as the letter "ű", but the "á", the "é", the "í" are not a problem anymore, and I have these written down. I have my notes on where the question mark and the exclamation mark are. So, these are somewhat tricky… But I have these written down, and I use my notes (A 40).

From a technological perspective, this type of device use has always been characteristic for the older generation. In the years after the regime change of 1989, similar procedures were observed regarding their television and radio use. Partially related to this issue, the Internet use of the elderly is restricted to a relatively low number of software and websites, which is also characteristic of the number of devices.

Older adults left behind by their family members, who have moved away in the context of economic mobility and labour migration, keep in touch with them through two main instruments: the mobile phone and the Internet, characteristically with the complementary use of these instruments/media. The mobile phone ensures a digitally mediated communication that acts as a replacement/surrogate of direct human contact but without fully conveying the cosiness of direct communication (cf. Benczik, 2001). In the interpersonal communication mediated by the Internet – primarily through Skype and Facebook Messenger –, the sound is complemented by the visual dimension. Finally, social media (in our case, Facebook) serves as a wider framework and context of maintaining contact through monitoring the important events in the lives of

family members, relatives, and friends living away from home and acknowledging them via likes and comments, with an infrequent use of the communications options (liking, commenting, and messaging) provided by the program.

In addition to the active use, older adults are also involved in a use that can mostly be considered passive. This is the practice of gaining insight into the world of the Internet through "looking over the shoulder" of their children and grandkids. In these cases, younger people use their own social media page for showing them pictures of relatives and acquaintances, for writing letters/messages to the far-off relative or former friend, and sometimes browse for information on behalf of the older adult.

We have already cited Herman Bausinger, according to whom our new technological devices, while transforming our everyday practices and worldviews, often also bring back earlier "community forms" in use (Bausinger, 1995: 40). In the case of Internet use behaviour and the digital device use of the elderly, this means the reactivation of specific forms of collective media consumption:

> I mostly use the Internet alone, but it also happens that my friend comes over, and we browse together and discuss the topics we see; so, we use it together. My husband is often there beside me. If I see something interesting, and he's not there beside me, then I write it down 'cause I can't save it; if he's around, I ask him to save it, as he already knows his way around; so, it depends on who's home and what the circumstances are; it depends on many things, but usually I use it by myself. (A 45)

Another interviewee responded as follows to the question of how she keeps in touch with her children living abroad: "We talk on the mobile phone, and sometimes, rarely, I go next door, and we talk on Messenger at my neighbour in the evening, after they've come home from work" (A 39). This type of use of digital devices and media recalls the practice of collectively listening to the radio in the 1950s and 60s or of collectively watching television in the first half of the 1990s.

7. The Role of Social Context in Acquiring Digital Skills by Older People Living in Mureş County, Romania

Digital devices enter into the possession of the older generation primarily through family mediation. Sometimes their children or grandchildren give them their used devices as gifts, and at other times they buy new ones for their aging parents:

> Our computer is a used one, but it meets our needs. Our son gave it to us as a gift because he had bought a new one. He also talked us into getting an Internet connection so we can more easily access information, read newspapers, and keep in touch with friends who live abroad... At first, I was not very impressed, but we also thought of the fact that our grandchildren will be able to watch cartoons and children's movies when visiting us… (A 54)

Also, there are examples that the neighbours[5] or the employee of the phone company[6] recommends the purchase of the new-generation device (the smartphone) and the Internet subscription.

Some of our interviews have revealed cases in which older adults acquire smartphones and laptops upon their own initiative and begin to use the Internet on their own. However, the motivation coming from their immediate environment can be felt even in these cases: their children, grandchildren, and neighbours are already using such devices, and they do not want to "fall behind". A smaller but not insignificant part of the 65+ generation has become acquainted with computers as active workers, in employment circumstances or has bought computers for their children in the second half of the 1990s. In their case, using the computer did not present any difficulties; they only had to learn how to use the Internet.

According to the unanimous findings of the available literature, facilitators also play an important role in shaping the digital skills of older adults (see Rab, 2009: 51–52). Members of the older generation often rely on the knowledge of people from their immediate environment, who are more familiar with digital devices, for solving personal problems. These helpers most often come from the immediate family (i.e. children and grandchildren), but relatives, close friends, and neighbours or – in rare cases – certain "specialists"[7] are also called upon. However, the spread of digital skills occurs more commonly within the family, and family members have a key role in "closing the gap" in this knowledge area (cf. Rab, 2009: 52): "I was taught by my son and my husband. They have

5 An interviewee responded to the question regarding the people helping with his Internet use: "As long as my son was still at home, it was primarily he who helped me, otherwise… my neighbours" (A 59); and yet another subject: "I use it [i.e. the Internet] with the help of my neighbour" (A 39).

6 E.g.: "My husband's two-year contract had expired, so he went to the shop and one of the clerks offered him a new phone for renewing the subscription. Eventually, he accepted it. Since then, he has a Facebook profile and sends greetings to relatives and acquaintances on holidays. Now that Henrietta [her second daughter] lives with her family in Sweden, they send us pictures, and we also send them. We also use it for keeping in touch" (A 66).

7 E.g.: "It happened that we didn't know what the problem was, so we called Gazsi on my phone, and he told us what to do; if we couldn't solve the problem even then, my husband would go over to the Orange shop, and the girls there would fix it" (A 66).

showed me the basics, and some things I have figured out by myself. The initial difficulty was the panic that I may press the wrong button or do something wrong, perhaps visiting a pay site and generating additional expenses…" (A 54). Another interviewee reminisced: "Internet use came later. My grandchild first taught it to my husband so they could talk, do stuff, watch the news, and they did everything on the Internet, and I was just watching them with envy. I did not dare to intervene 'cause I am a slower learner, but after my grandchild had left, I began pestering my husband, until he taught me as well" (A 47).

The facilitators identified above play a key role in the "first encounter" with the new technology and in the initial period of its domestication as well as, sometimes, in the periods following technological changes and the appearance of more recent generations of devices and/or programs. However, in their everyday use, the elderly has to rely on their personal skills. This is even more the case with older people who have been left alone. The interviews conducted in the framework of our research point to the fact that the older adults who live alone are the most successful in adopting the new technology as they are forced to familiarize themselves with it because otherwise they cannot stay in touch with their children and grandchildren living abroad.

Nevertheless, sometimes everyone is forced to resort to the specialist knowledge of the helpers, most often during technical breakdowns, for setting up new devices and putting them into operation, or when a new program or an updated edition of an already familiar program comes out. Overall, the mastering of digital technology and of Internet use happens with the support of social intermediaries (see Rab, 2009: 51).

Conclusions

As a result of the ongoing digitization, mediatization, and virtualization of our everyday existence (see Fehér K. 2016: 23), without the ownership of digital devices, digital skills, and digital practices necessary for the participation in the digital culture, in lack of the digital empowerment from society, communication, the maintenance of various interpersonal relationships, self-care, the efficient organization of leisure time, the acquisition of certain goods, and, generally, providing a sense of fulfilled existence seems almost completely impossible.

The use of digital media devices among older people is motivated by need and necessity. However, as a result of its "domestication" (i.e. familiarization), the digital device becomes involved in their everyday life and even improves their quality of life. At the same time, this use is also strongly ritualized and associated with the lack of confidence and uncertainty. Thus, usage practices develop in the framework of two opposed processes: the necessity of communication, which

increases the frequency of use, and the fear of digital media, which reduces it. Digital media plays a significant role in overcoming the individual and social disadvantages of older people as it fulfils a prominent function both in the search for information satisfying personal interests and in the maintenance of contact and communication with the family.

The use of digital devices follows the patterns of the characteristic practices developed in the previous periods of media and device use among the elderly and is also characterized (especially in the early stages of familiarization with the technology) by the recourse to helpers from their environment and, in a smaller measure, by social (common) use.

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