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MYTH-BUSTING REVIEW

OLDER PEOPLE NEED MEDIA EDUCATION THAT TRANSCENDS MERE DIGITAL SUPPORT

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Summary

- Older people are a heterogeneous group of people with diverse media literacy needs. These needs must be supported extensively in all areas (using, understanding and creating media content)
- Media literacy training must be based on the needs and interests of older people.

In which area is there still a lack of knowledge?

- Less practical work and research is carried out related to the media literacies of older people compared to those of children and young people.
- Particular attention should be paid to the ability of older people to understand and critically analyze media content as well as to produce these.

Recommendation

- Media literacy must be supported in all stages of life.
- Positive representation of older people must be increased.

MEDIA EDUCATION consists of education, guidance and support activities with the main goal of developing the *media literacy* of people of all ages. Generally speaking, media literacy refers to an ability to access different information resources and using, understanding, critically assessing and creating various kinds of media content, including text, image, sound and combinations of these. This means that media literacy involves

much more extensive competence than a mere ability to use digital devices. In an increasingly digitalised and media-focused society, media literacy and all its areas are perceived as a civic skill whose development is a life-long process. A lack of media literacy could pose a challenge in coping with day-to-day life or exceptional periods such as the coronavirus outbreak in spring 2020.

Digital technology and media use play a key role in learning, wellbeing, daily life and participation in society. Media literacy is necessary in contexts such as ensuring smoothly running day-to-day life, following and understanding the news, making transactions using e-services (such as the MyKanta health care pages or online banking services), and communicating with family members and friends.

MEDIA LITERACY OF OLDER PEOPLE

So far, the media education and media literacy of *older people*, i.e. those aged 65 and above, has been promoted and studied less compared to children and young people. Nevertheless, increasing interest in the topic can be observed in both Finland and internationally.

In the media, the media literacy of older people has been primarily described from a negative, narrow and homogenized perspective¹. Older people are represented in a certain way, i.e. primarily described as a group of people that are struggling with digital devices, media and services and are at a risk of social exclusion. These representations fail to denote that older people are a heterogeneous group with marked differences in the various areas of media literacy². Negative representations may also contribute to enforcing the stereotypical perceptions of older people. Overall, referring to everyone over 65 years of age as “older people” in the context of media literacy is overly homogenizing, as people’s skills also vary based on the age group they belong to: youngest-old (65–74-year-olds), middle-old (75–84-year-olds) or oldest-old people (over 85-year-olds)³.

There is need for more research on the extent and level of media literacy of older people. Nevertheless, based on research conducted so far, we already know that there are needs for support and education in all areas of media literacy⁴. For instance, some older people struggle in assessing the reliability and accuracy of

news spread on social media⁵ and the health-related information available in the media⁶.

DIGITAL SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE

Internationally, the majority of media education training provided to older people is concerned with using digital devices. The training is rarely focused on understanding, critically assessing and producing media content. While there is need to pay special attention to areas concerned with understanding and critically assessing information as well as content creation, there are also needs for education concerned within all areas of media literacy (using, understanding, creating).⁷

In Finland, organisations (such as Finnish Pensioners’ Federation, Enter ry, The National Seniors’ Union, the Finnish Association for the Welfare of Older People), libraries, community colleges, projects, municipalities and companies offer training, guidance and support in using digital devices and media. The Digital and Population Data Services Agency supports the work of digital support providers at the national level⁸. Meanwhile, less training and support is available on the other dimensions of media literacy: the ability to understand, critically assess and analyse, and personally produce different media content, such as text, image, sound and combinations of these.

TOWARDS MORE EXTENSIVE MEDIA EDUCATION FOR OLDER PEOPLE

As previously mentioned, attention should be paid to the ability of older people to produce, critically analyze and understand media content. However, the media literacy training must always be founded on the individual’s own starting points (such as the level of knowledge and skills, and available devices), be based on needs and take into account the diversity of the target group⁹.

1 Rasi, 2020

2 see e.g. Rasi et al., 2020; Rivinen, 2020; Rivinen et al., 2020

3 Lee et al., 2018

4 Rasi et al., 2020; Rivinen, 2020; Ofcom, 2015, 2019

5 Guess et al., 2019

6 Eronen et al., 2019

7 Rasi et al., 2020

8 <https://dvv.fi/digituki>

9 see. e.g. Rasi et al. 2020; Rivinen, 2020; Rivinen et al. 2020; Vuojärvi et al., 2020

It is worth noticing that as people age, not only their needs but also their interests change, and this should be taken into account in planning and implementing media education¹⁰. In the future, the heterogeneity of the target group will gain even more emphasis, as a result of the retirement of age groups with even more advanced skills in using digital media and information and communication technology¹¹.

Older people must be perceived as potential content creators as well as socially, culturally and societally active users not unlike any other age group instead of merely users of necessary services, such as online banking. The goal must be to support older people in the various roles that change during a person's life course, including as family members and friends, active citizens, consumers and customers¹². A key part of developing media literacy also involves influencing people's attitudes, particularly reducing fears and increasing a positive mindset.

Therefore, media education must be developed and maintained across all life stages. In addition to formal and traditional education institutions, other agents also play a significant role, including people close to the older person, associations, various service providers, libraries, media and adult education centres. Support provided by other older people, i.e. peers, which brings simultaneous benefits to both parties, the help provider and recipient, has turned out to be particularly beneficial¹³. Intergenerational support is particularly important if younger generations get to guide older people based on their own knowledge and skills¹⁴ instead of external instructions and views. The provision of support and the development of the comprehensive media literacy of older people should thus be set as a joint goal for all of us instead of making it a responsibility of a single service provider or close relative. ■

This myth-busting review aims to correct a common misconception with arguments based on research knowledge. This is a non-systematic meta-review in that it is based on high-quality research but does this selectively.

This evidence synthesis is based on research conducted in the [lkäihMe](#) project (2018–2021) by the University of Lapland. The research data comprise (1) a systematic literature review on interventions for the media education of older people and (2) four case studies. The case studies have examined the views of older people, the experts working with them, and teacher students specialised in adult education concerning how the media education of older people should be implemented and how the views of teacher students on the media education of older people change during a study module on related themes. The argument is a joint synthesis by the authors of this article.

10 Rasi et al., 2019

11 Rivinen, 2020

12 Rasi et al., 2020

13 Rasi et al., 2020; Rivinen, 2020; Rivinen et al., 2020

14 Rasi et al., 2020

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