

## Abstract

In today's society ICT plays an important role in everyday life. This daily life becomes more and more digital and we are progressively connected by means of digital devices and processes. This dominance of ICT has become an ideology of the *interface(d) society*. In this society the exchange of information and communication in general is being conducted by means of digital interfaces. Connectivity is the rule. But besides great advantages this ideology also bears serious cons, especially for seniors in our society. They experience feelings of solitude, social isolation and anxieties because public space and traditional communities disappear. Feelings that in the long run however might affect us all.

### ***Seniors in the interface(d) society; Connectivity and the loss of community***

In today's society ICT plays an important role in everyday life. This daily life becomes more and more digital. Not only in our work, but also in our private lives and in the so called public space, we are progressively connected by means of digital devices and processes. It is therefore fair to say that ICT becomes a, if not the dominant factor in society in the nearby future.

It is for this reason that the European Union stresses the importance of 'e-inclusion'. Given the growing importance of ICT and of being connected through Internet, Europe wants to be sure that 'no one is left behind in enjoying the benefits of ICT. 'e-Inclusion means both inclusive ICT and the use of ICT to achieve wider inclusion objectives. It focuses on participation of all individuals and communities in all aspects of the information society. e-Inclusion policy, therefore, aims at reducing gaps in ICT usage and promoting the use of ICT to overcome exclusion, and improve economic performance, employment opportunities, quality of life, social participation and cohesion.' <sup>1</sup>

Since new technologies are embraced by both politics and commerce, the general discussion about the use of ICT and the issue of e-inclusion is most favourable to this new technology. More and more the digital society seems to be the dominant paradigm of our times. This raises the suspicion of a specific kind of ideology in which the negative aspects of the widespread use of ICT in daily life are being neglected or even denied. It is however our duty to face this ideology and confront it with its downsides, in particular with respect to our ageing European fellow citizens, but also in a more general way.

We would like to call this ideology the ideology of the *interface(d) society*. In this society the exchange of information and communication in general is being conducted by means of digital interfaces. And to specific observations it is already here. When you enter a train, bus or metro, people are staring at their smartphones, tablets or laptop computers. By means of their devices, they are connected to the other and to the world. The same holds for our work and even leisure. Reality (but what is real?) no longer comes to us by means of our senses but by means of the screen of our devices.

We trust this new 'reality' even more than we trust our direct experience, the one we get from our own eyes or ears. It is a *mediated reality*, which make us humans cyborgs. Just like the Borgs in the Star Trek series, we are connected to the others by means of devices and a 'sub space link'. It is as if we were becoming a mediated humanoid, losing the real features of our being humans (social, sensorial, political and relational).

The benefits of this *mutation* are numerous. We have immediate access to astronomical quantities of data. We are instantly connected to our friends and loved ones. We are able to perform complex tasks faster and more easy. We can manage our finances and businesses with a finger. We are online connected to public administration. We can be more productive, more competitive, more innovative. We can document our lives by means of social media, store our information in the cloud, master our communication. Et cetera, et cetera. The dominant discourse of this ideology is that of economics. The semantics are about gain, profit, access, competition, velocity, time, efficiency, employment, savings...

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<sup>1</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/information\\_society/activities/einclusion/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/einclusion/index_en.htm)

However, the *interface society* could suit well to young and middle aged people: the question is if it suits also for the growing number of seniors in European society. Few examples will demonstrate the social, economical, technical, ethical, political and cultural problems of the interface society for senior citizens.<sup>2</sup>

On the social level more and more services and goods can only be obtained by the use of ICT. Banks are closing their affiliates because they change to internet banking. Communal services can only be obtained from municipalities via the internet. Physical shops are closing in favour of online shops. Train or airline tickets can only be obtained from machines or by means of the computer. Fares for public transport can only be paid with a credit card.<sup>3</sup> The result of this is that people who don't have access to information and communication technology more and more suffer from solitude, loneliness and social isolation. This is especially true for seniors. There is less and less public space in the interface society where they can physically meet other people. There is only the possibility of virtual encounters via chat boxes, digital market places and online portals.

On a technical level, the development of ICT requires specific kinds of knowledge and skills. Especially because user friendliness isn't yet the standard in industry and technological innovations seems to go faster every time, these knowledge and skills are necessary to be able to be and to stay connected to the interface society. In particular seniors have trouble to keep up with technological developments. When trying to master ICT or digital devices, they encounter the problem of numerous standards, complex digital systems and so on. It seems to be that the interface society is exclusively designed for young people, who are in fact defined as *digital natives*. Of course these youngsters one day become seniors themselves and might encounter the same problems.

The interface society also raises questions of ethical concern. Recently we were being told that American and other security agencies had access to and controlled our emails, telephone and Skype calls and text messages by means of a digital program called Prism. It is part of what you could describe as *ubiquitous ICT presence*. This not only counts for government agencies, but also companies (big data) and for instance health care and welfare services. Especially health care and welfare services are of importance to seniors. Mordini et al<sup>4</sup> describe this in 'Senior citizens and the ethics of e-inclusion' as '*somatic surveillance*'. Health and welfare are increasingly being dominated by digital supervision. And because seniors make more use of these, they are more than others subject of this digital forms of surveillances.

Last but not least, there is the cultural/political dimensions of the interface society. The European Union was founded as a community of values, including the respect for human beings, their freedoms, rights and dignity; the principles of solidarity and responsibility; the rule of law and equality before the law; cultural diversity; the consolidation of the European social model; and the development of local and regional autonomy and civil society<sup>5</sup>. Nowadays, it seems that certain values weigh heavier in the ideology of the interface society than others. The result is a *digital divide* which in the European Union is primarily age-related.

In short, e-inclusion of all European citizens and especially seniors, is part of the discourse of a dominant ideology which leads to a society in which the interface is the main point of access and reference to goods, services, information and the other in general. For administrative, political and economic reasons it is important to include all people within this idea of digital connectivity. But there is not only a strong bias in this ideology, in favour of young people and a specific set of values, which denies the interests of seniors, their needs and their way of life. This whole idea of connectivity also breaks down the traditional idea of community. Instead of being happily connected to the rest of the world, it raises feelings of anxiety, social isolation, solitude, fear and raises questions like loss of community, mass manipulation, mass surveillance and even mass delusion.

In the short run seniors may suffer most of this phantasy of a connected, interface(d) society. However in the long run it effects us all, young and old. With the clear and present danger of being assimilated by digital technology and become true Borgs ourselves.

## PERSONAL FEATURES

Ad Hofstede MSc (1960) is the Director of the Erasmus Academie in Rotterdam, part of the Erasmus University Rotterdam, which has two departments: one is for senior education (HOVO) and the other is for life-long learning, open

<sup>2</sup> In this paper we don't make a difference between younger seniors (age 65-80) and older seniors (age >80), though it could be helpful to make this distinction. See also Senior citizens and the ethics of e-inclusion, DOI 10.1007/s10676-009-9189-7. Furthermore I like to stress that many if not all issues I raise are also true for any other citizen, young or old.

<sup>3</sup> These examples are from the Netherlands.

<sup>4</sup> E. Mordini et al, Senior citizens and the ethics of e-inclusion, Springer 2009 (DOI 10.1007/s10676-009-9189-7)

<sup>5</sup> E. Mordini et al, Senior citizens and the ethics of e-inclusion, Springer 2009 (DOI 10.1007/s10676-009-9189-7)

to professionals, companies and local authorities to get training and education at a university level. Ad Hofstede studied sociology and philosophy at Leiden University.

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