MIND THE DIGITAL GAP

#YFactor
#Digitalisation

Handbook
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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 has challenged people’s lives across Europe in unprecedented ways - threatening not only lives but livelihoods as well.

Regional and local authorities have been key actors for fighting the pandemic on the ground as they have been the ones monitoring the disease spread and implementing national directives. They have been working to mobilize fiscal and human resources to address context specific impact and search for cooperative and innovative solutions.

COVID-19 crisis has shown, more than ever, how essential digital assets have become for our societies and, by acknowledging so, digital solutions allowing students, professionals and politicians to continue to pursue their work have been promptly developed on a local level.

Digitalisation has, therefore, demonstrated the power to offer both innovative and high-quality solutions, but, at the same time, in face of the existing skills and access to technology, it has also exposed the so-called digital divide.

For this reason, our group of Trainees has decided to tackle the theme of inclusive digitalisation in the fields of culture, education and civic participation, by organising an online event which took place on 11 and 12 June 2020. The event consisted of three thematic webinars, whose aim was to educate the attendees by sharing inclusive digital practices implemented across EU regions, and three thematic workshops, where participants were invited to share challenges and suggest recommendations. The deliberations’ results have been compiled in this handbook with the following objectives in mind:

• Raising awareness about challenges linked to the digitalisation process;
• Fostering knowledge exchange and capacity building;
• Promoting cooperation
• Contributing towards the integration of inclusive digitalisation principles in the regional and local recovery strategies

EU AND DIGITALISATION: THE STATE OF PLAY

Digital technologies have changed the way people exchange information and how they interact in the public and private sectors; within this frame, the European Union plays an active role in shaping the digital transformation.

After the three consecutive strategies eEurope 2002 plans, eEurope 2005 and the i2010 strategy, digital policies were identified as key priorities of the Europe 2020 strategy and the digital agenda for Europe was established in 2010. The urgency of accelerating digitalisation increased to the point that digital policies became the second of the ten priorities of the Juncker plan and this led to the EU Digital Single Market strategy in May 2015, which has the aim of creating an inclusive digital society by boosting innovation, reducing digital divides and ensuring an adequate regulatory framework in the area of intellectual property rights1. Europe’s overall digital performance and EU countries’ digital competitiveness are measured by the Digital

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Economy and Society Index (DESI) which consists of the following indicators²:

- Connectivity - Fixed broadband take-up, fixed broadband coverage, mobile broadband and broadband prices
- Human Capital - Internet user skills and advanced skills
- Use Of Internet - Citizens’ use of internet services and online transactions
- Integration Of Digital Technology - Business digitisation and e-commerce
- Digital Public Services - e-Government

Among these indicators, the most relevant ones for addressing the problem of the digital divide are Connectivity and Human Capital, since access to technology, together with the development of advanced skills, become increasingly important as a means of allowing everyone to participate in the digital society.

Connectivity

The connectivity dimension of the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) looks at both the demand and the supply side of fixed and mobile broadband. Based on the DESI 2020 report and as illustrated from the graphics below, there is a huge discrepancy in overall and rural broadband coverage for both fixed and mobile; this significant gap between total and rural coverage shows the regional disparities in digital opportunities and confirms that more investment is needed in rural areas in order to catch up.

Human Capital

Although 85% of citizens used Internet in 2019, only 58% proved at least basic digital skills while the rest of the population seems to be still unable to perform basic tasks, such as connect to the Wi-Fi network or simply use websites. Therefore, having an internet connection is not sufficient; they must be equipped with the appropriate skills that range from basic usage skills to advanced ones.

Lack of relevant skills remains the most important factor deterring households from having internet access at

home; since this factor influences the awareness of digitalisation’s potential benefits, it may be among the reasons of EU citizens not having internet access at home because they think they do not need it.

THE PROJECT ITSELF

Timeline of the YFactor

This YFactor Project 2020 was conceived to be developed in four different strategic phases:

1. **30 April**: Start of a broad branding campaign for the YFactor Project 2020, in order to raise awareness of the project’s new brand and aim

2. **9 May / Europe’s day**: Open call for the YFactor Project’s audience: EU citizens, Local and Regional Authorities (LRA’s), Civil Society Organizations, Public Administrators, Experts, Academics, NGO’s. The objective was promoting the submission of digital challenges and best solutions while facing this COVID-19 pandemic as well as the endorsement of the registrations for the webinars and workshops

3. **11 and 12 June**: *Mind the Digital Gap* event. Inclusive digitalisation discussions in the fields of Civic Participation, Education and Culture took the form of webinars (11 June) and workshops (12 June)

4. **September**: The last phase consisted of the publication of a visual handbook with digital challenges, practices and useful recommendations, based on both an active research and inputs received by the participants of the online events.

**Figure 1**: Project Timeline

Practices and speakers selection

The following are the main criteria that guided the selection process of practices discussed during the webinars: high degree of inclusiveness, transferability, public sector continuity and accessibility. The speakers presenting were either local and regional representatives or experts and innovative practitioners with some degree of notoriety and authority, with the respect of the gender balance criteria.

Communication strategy

The project contents and main messages have been spread by implementing a Social Media strategy as well as an e-mail marketing campaign.

The three main channels of communication that have been used during this YFactor Project were Facebook, Instagram and Twitter specific profiles, together with the punctual support of the CoR Social Media
platforms. 52 posts and one paid advertisement have been published between May and June 2020.

In order to disseminate the information and precise instructions about the digital events, targeted e-mails have been sent out in order to reach different groups of stakeholders. This e-mail marketing campaign has been supported by the inclusion of the project content in the weekly CoR newsletter and the internal HR newsletter, leading to the YFactor event page of the CoR website, which was the main informative source of this project.

This strategy aimed at reaching 170 registrations to the events as well as redirecting web traffic towards CoR website.

Final figures

The success of this fully digital project is reflected in the final statistics. The project reached 170 registrants coming from 29 different countries and the balanced number of registrations per thematic webinar and workshop shows that people register for more than one event within the two days.

In order to attend the events, participants were asked to connect through ZOOM; nonetheless, the webinars were also streamed on YouTube. The final participation figures for webinars are the ones below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Culture (ZOOM)</th>
<th>Culture (YouTube)</th>
<th>Education (ZOOM)</th>
<th>Education (YouTube)</th>
<th>Civic Participation (ZOOM)</th>
<th>Civic Participation (YouTube)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CULTURE</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDUCATION</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIVIC PARTICIPATION</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regarding the workshops, only ZOOM was used in order to allow meaningful discussions in separate virtual rooms. Hereby the final numbers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Culture (ZOOM)</th>
<th>Culture (YouTube)</th>
<th>Education (ZOOM)</th>
<th>Education (YouTube)</th>
<th>Civic Participation (ZOOM)</th>
<th>Civic Participation (YouTube)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CULTURE</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDUCATION</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>CIVIC PARTICIPATION</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Event program

As mentioned earlier, the online event consisted of a series of thematic webinars (11 June) and thematic workshops (12 June) whose timeslots and presentation titles were shared in YFactor project social media channels:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Civic Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gytis Dovydaيتis Immigrating to the internet</td>
<td>Satu Haapanen Quality recommendations for distance learning - case Oulu, Finland</td>
<td>Cathy Clerbaux &amp; Oumou Zé A first Participatory Budgeting in Watermael-Boitsfort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marilyn Gaughan Reddan &amp; William Fitzgerald Delivering a European Capital of Culture in Covid, the challenges and opportunities</td>
<td>Manel Trenchs Mola My own edtech evolution</td>
<td>Taoufik Amzile Objectif 100: Fostering Digital Inclusion through Circular Economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.00-14.30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Taoufik Amzile Objectif 100: Fostering Digital Inclusion through Circular Economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Citizen K Democracy 4.0: Democratic upgrade required in the 21st century</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4:** Webinars final agenda

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Civic Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10.00-12.00</td>
<td>Digitising culture and bridging the digital divide: local strategies for inclusivity, accessibility and sustainability</td>
<td>Challenges and solutions to boost an inclusive digital transition across Europe in the field of education</td>
<td>Challenges and digital solutions for democratic civic participation, engagement and solidarity in times of crisis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5:** Workshops final agenda
The COVID-19 crisis has resulted in a confinement and restriction of mobility on an unprecedented scale, and has raised serious challenges for the cultural sector. An initial challenge faced by the cultural sector therefore is the social distancing restrictions that have seen 128 countries entirely or partially close down their cultural institutions. This has had a clear effect on the cultural sector which has witnessed one of the strongest negative economic impacts due to its inherently social nature. According to preliminary estimates by Eurostat, the COVID-19 crisis may affect up to 7.3 million cultural and creative jobs across the EU. Over 30% of the people affected are self-employed and lack adequate social protection.

At a national level measures were taken to support the cultural sector with financial support in Italy and Spain and via the State Aid Temporary Framework. In this regard, 4 (Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia and Lithuania) out of the 28 approved state aid schemes exclusively mention support to the cultural sector in the form of direct grants, loan guarantees or wage subsidies to address the solvency issues resulting from cancelled or restricted activities.

Billions of people are turning to culture as a source of comfort, well-being and connection. For instance, in France consumption of cultural goods was considered as an essential activity during this time of confinement.

Despite this so far no targeted measures have been taken towards building sector resilience by engaging a more strategic long-term vision of transitioning sector activities to digital space and ensuring sector activity continuity in a situation of another nationwide quarantine.

This has raised a number of challenges for the cultural sector. The main challenges are the access to digital platforms issue, overcoming digital constraints and audience fatigue — both technical and social in nature. Hence it is essential to approach those issues through the lens of three themes: accessibility, inclusivity and sustainability.

Accessibility

The problem of access was highlighted by the webinar and workshop participants through technical, engagement and creative or ownership angles. On one hand, the issue of technical access or broadband connectivity in rural areas came through, noting the fact that many remote EU areas and rural regions are still lacking in broadband connection. It was highlighted that often uninterrupted streaming that relies on stable internet connection is taken for granted by artists. Unfortunately, none of the below challenges have managed to circumvent the connectivity issue as it calls for infrastructural solutions.

On the other hand, translating cultural experiences to virtual space increases access by enabling unprecedented dissemination (not limited to physical locale) of some cultural services like theatre plays or heritage site explorations. In addition, digital culture is more accessible to people with limited physical mobility. This dynamic of access is well illustrated by the innovative virtual play “Online (anti)utopia #PROTEST” premiered by KOSMOS and Kaunas Chambers Theatre during the quarantine. The play takes into consideration challenges and opportunities of access in the online space, delivering a play that balances theatrical immersion and expands access for audiences.

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5 Source: Ibid., p. 2
However, access to digital space does not automatically lead to access to quality culture as digital content is unfiltered and the user might find it difficult to source what they find interesting, or might feel overwhelmed leading to audience fatigue. This challenge has been of mutual concern to all workshop and webinar participants, highlighted by artists and users alike.

The other dimension of accessibility challenge is pertinent among artists, especially local creatives. It relates to access to technical resources to create quality digital content, which are often very expensive with grassroots or “fringe” artists from local communities being unable to afford this equipment, thus risking exclusion from digital space. Some initiatives, like UnitedWeStream mitigate this challenge by pairing up with media and technical partners to provide participating artists with production support to deliver quality streaming material.

Lastly worth noting, is a conceptual challenge of access - given that digital material is easily copied, spread and modified, digital cultural products can have wider dissemination but also raise intellectual property issues; they are also potentially in a constant state of ‘becoming’, they are often fluid and intangible, thus compromising artist control over access to their work.

### Inclusivity

Cultural inclusivity ensures cultural participation, access, and the right to express and interpret culture. It calls for mixing the best problem-solving, creative, innovative and ingenious practices. The challenges in terms of inclusivity are composed of several factors.

One of them would be the impossibility to work (physically). This might require a better facilitation of remote working, for instance by having the required tools and learning how to use them or by adapting to the new technologies by organizing workshops. Another challenge is the lack of knowledge of the technical tools. To overcome it people need to familiarize with online platforms or at least find a technical manager. A third challenge would be the challenge of value. Culture related persons believe that organizing festivals, performances or art exhibitions that would highlight what value actually means and showing people real art would be of a very big help.

Another problem to oversee is the unpredictability surrounding a cultural event and its organisation, which can have heavy consequences on inclusivity. In order to avoid it in the future, people need to plan a lot of activities in advance and this should start in times when no hazards seem to be coming. Finally, the last challenge to address here is the remuneration. Unfortunately, creative people struggled during these challenging times, this is why grants should be provided by governments and later by the consumers (once they are educated). Moreover, creating different digital platforms for funding and partnerships would be very helpful.

### Resilience/Sustainability

As alluded to in the introduction preliminary estimates suggest the COVID-19 crisis may affect up to 7.3 million cultural and creative jobs. It is evident therefore that the cultural sector faces a number of issues concerning its long-term resilience and sustainability.

Firstly, as touched upon previously in the context of inclusivity and accessibility, the issue of access to high speed broadband in rural regions is a key challenge faced by artists and is one which must be solved in order to ensure the long term sustainability of artists being able to work remotely in these rural regions.

Secondly, Cork city Councilor and heritage advocate Cllr Kieran McCarthy highlighted during his webinar that the heritage and culture sector create job
opportunities within museums and cultural venues. However, as an alternative to these traditional cultural venues has yet to be translated to a digital space these jobs are still at risk. This is a point which was further developed by artist and scholar Gytis Dovydaitis who suggested the need for the cultural sector to rethink digital space. Gytis suggested that one challenge faced by the cultural sector was that digital solutions are still viewed as temporary rather than an end in and of itself. In challenging this perception and viewing digital spaces for culture as medium or long term institutions then it will be possible to define roles that were previously sustained in traditional heritage and culture jobs. One solution offered by Kieran McCarthy as a possibility for sustaining a transition to digital environments for traditional heritage institutes being the development of Public / Private partnerships. However, the development of such hybrid funding is a challenge in and of itself with many cultural institutions, as highlighted by Kaunas Chambers Theatre as well, are non profitable and rely strongly from public funds to deliver affordable programming combined with educational workshops.

Finally, a key challenge facing the cultural sector as it digitalises is maintaining the long term sustainability of an artist’s cultural commodity. William Fitzgerald is the artistic director of Galway Film Fleadh speaking during the Y-Factor webinar he highlighted the challenge of limiting distribution of film’s in events such as his in order to control audience access. The challenge therefore faced by film festivals is the creation of a package which maintains the quality of the cultural medium in question, as well as limiting access. This was done with the view of maintaining sectoral resilience and ensuring the long term sustainability of the film sector.

PRACTICES

In the following paragraphs, regional and local initiatives coping with the mentioned challenges are presented; some of the practices below have been illustrated during the Culture webinar, part of the Mind The Digital Gap online event.

From home, but never alone

In these challenging times, in Groningen, Netherlands, the NITE Hotel, adopting the “Never waste a good crisis” of Winston Churchill, has developed an online platform for entertaining people during the quarantine by looking for answers and solutions to the home isolation. NITE is short for National Interdisciplinary Theatre Ensemble, and it aims to create at least one large stage production per year which tours through the Netherlands and Flanders.

As due to the pandemic all the museums and theatres are closed, the NITE Hotel offers to the artists a chance to present their performances online, and to the spectators a possibility of feeling somewhere else but their homes. In recent weeks, NITE Hotel built a digital platform, with a large virtual theatre hall and various rooms, to encourage actors, singers and other artists in their online performances and to distract those staying home. This way everyone can continue to meet and show their performances.

Moreover, because many artists remained without their physical jobs, the NITE ensemble includes actors, dancers and musicians in experiments with remote online performances that are very close to everybody at the same time. Therefore, although the virtual NITE hotel corridors are empty, the rooms are full of theater, dance, music and visual art. The NITE hotel has a large theater hall where a theater performance can be seen every Friday evening. These engage culture related people in their professional activities.

After all the performances, participants of the online event can chat with the cast at the virtual bar. Since the NITE Hotel is financed by several sponsors, the artists are also remunerated, which solves their lack of payment challenge.

NITE mixes theater, dance, music, fashion, film and visual art. This solves the problem of inclusivity, by including in its virtual world all the themes for all types
of consumers. The NITE hotel has a very full agenda and is accessible virtually free of charge for everyone.

Digital theatre in dystopian world of social-isolation

Figure 6: #PROTEST play, KOSMOS Theatre

#PROTEST is a play brought by KOSMOS Theatre and Kaunas Chambers Theatre in Lithuania about a dystopian future where society lives in isolation with the only social interface occurring online. It is performed live in virtual space, utilizing multiple video and sound directing platforms simultaneously. The quarantine popular platform ZOOM served as the plug in channel for the actors at home while the audience was streaming their live interaction. The COVID-19 confinement inspired conceptual and technical production with six-week preparations and rehearsals occurring entirely remotely. The creative team was challenged professionally, psychologically, and technically to adapt to the new mode of performing. Streaming, online communication, backdrop of video projections, and live video editing occurred simultaneously requiring unprecedented technical skill and coordination from the team. Oftentimes technical tests and troubleshooting into late night would leave no time for acting rehearsals. Moments before the premiere, the team remained uncertain if the broadband connection was reliable enough to deliver the play uninterrupted. But it did, making #PROTEST the single nationwide theatre premiere during the COVID-19 confinement in Lithuania.

#PROTEST had 7 free live performances with over 10,000 streams online. The play proved that theatre could be resilient against pandemics. It can adapt to virtual space and translate authentic viewer experience to different dynamics of theatre exposure where streaming via computer contributes to viewer immersion. More so, the digital space opened opportunities to make theatre more inclusive and accessible by delivering professional theatre to wider audiences - in remote and rural areas and to people with impaired mobility.

To fully deliver a vision of inclusive and resilient theatre in a digitized world, local authorities should support theatre to reach wider audiences by supporting in coordinated communications and dissemination of theatre activities, dedicating more public funds to offset the costs of technical preparations and capacity building for digital convening, and to encourage theatre to innovate and diversify its activities.

The digitalisation of film festivals

The Galway Film Fleadh is an example of a cultural festival showing resilience and adapting to the COVID-19 crisis. Founded in 1989 to showcase Irish filmmakers on an internationally recognised stage the festival is now in its 32nd year. Apart from acting as Ireland's premier short film festival the Film Fleadh also acts as Ireland's official Oscar selection festival for short-films, with each year's selection being shown in the historic town hall theatre.

The threat posed by COVID-19 challenged the festival's future sustainability and tested its resilience, therefore, it was decided to adapt and move the festival entirely online, this posed three key challenges:

1. Maintaining the quality of the art exhibited
2. Protecting the value of the cultural products which they exhibited
3. Hosting a market place in an online environment
Firstly, in order to maintain a high standard of film quality it was decided to seek out a digital streaming service which would allow the festival to maintain the high-quality of picture and audio which patrons had come to expect. To this the festival drew inspiration from other film festivals. A key example of best practice was located in Copenhagen’s CBH Docks film festival who combined the Shift 72 streaming technology with the industry knowledge of Festival Scope to put together a tailor made out of the box solution for online film festivals. This package was then adopted by Galway.

Secondly, through their analysis of previous online film festivals they found that the use of open platforms such as Vimeo left films open to losing their value as a cultural commodity. In order to protect against this and maintain the future sustainability of the film festival Galway’s Artistic Director Willam Fitzgerald explained that the Film Fleadh has geolocked their ticketing and has capped each film's online attendance at 400 attendees, which is based on the capacity of the town hall theatre where the physical event would traditionally take place.

Finally, the Film Fleadh took inspiration from other online events across Europe in order to host their film market place in an online environment. Joining with their partners in Galway 2020 they’ve managed to organise an online marketplace for filmmakers to socialise and exchange ideas by utilising the Zoom platform. Such partnerships were identified as key to maintaining long term resilience to the challenges faced by the culture sector.

AN OVERVIEW OF ADDITIONAL PRACTICES

Qreator - Home Together Edition (RO)

By creating an online digital space for artists, musicians and actors Qreator has adapted to the new challenges of COVID-19. The main purpose behind it, according to the founder, is to encourage people to stay home as much as possible as well as providing them with different opportunities for cultural entertainment. The digital platform facilitates live streaming from the artists’ homes and it also offers real physical rooms for groups of artists who need to perform together. Find more information here.

#laculturanonsiferma (IT)

An Italian online daily programme of cultural initiatives from theatres, festivals, museums, cultural venues from the region, was launched free of charge on the regional channels EmiliaRomagnaCreativa and Lepida TV, as well as on digital platforms. The #laculturanonsiferma initiative has made two digital platforms available to people for the publication and broadcasting of cultural content, in which it is possible to share existing digital content or to live stream concerts and shows, as well as to visit virtual museums. They invited the cultural operators from their region to share their work online in order to create a regional schedule that gives a feeling of togetherness to their isolated audience. Find more information here.

INdisTERNET (LT)

Organized by Culture Infocenter at Kaunas Artists’ House. This event series is an attempt to publicly problematize the challenges posed by digitization and to research the cultural impact of the internet through unconventional education-entertainment events. Collage-like courses of the event combine contemporary art, post-internet awareness, informal atmosphere, music, discussions, online video previews, academic thought and dis.art. During COVID19, the events moved to online space and in partnership with Kaunas Center for Hearing Impaired, utilized sign language to make the event accessible to those with impaired hearing. Find more information here.

United We Stream (DE/WorldWide)

As a response to the vibrant Berlin club scene distress caused by general closing of venues, the UWS initiative mobilized the music scene and media partners to support smaller music venues from going bankrupt by hosting live streaming disseminated via online music platforms accompanied by online crowdsourcing. The
initiative spread to 70 partner cities, 343 locations and engaged 1666 artists. Find more information here.

Kari Kola, Galway Film Festival (IE)

Originally intended as an in person event, Ireland’s coronavirus lockdown forced Finnish artist Kari Kola to adapt and bring his extraordinary Galway 2020 light installation to a digital platform. Thanks to the symbiotic relationship developed between the artist and Galway 2020’s digital team, they managed to capture one of the largest illuminated artworks in the world as Kari projected a ‘light roof’ over a Connemara mountain valley. The Galway 2020 digital team was then coordinated by Kari himself to ensure that the essence of his work was maintained despite the move to a digital medium platform. Find more information here.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations to Local and Regional Authorities:

1. Facilitate digital access for both artists and consumers to cultural events and cultural heritage by developing online platforms adapted to protect any form of arts;

2. Introduce flexibility and agility, and stakeholder consultation, in strategic plans for supporting cultural sector to deliver successful and engaging culture;

3. Invest in broadband and energy infrastructure development of rural and remote regions to ensure the long term sustainability of the cultural sector in these regions;

4. Encourage partnerships between culture sector, private sector and other digital transition stakeholders to deliver inclusive and accessible transition, i.e., create a stakeholder platform to connect with culture actors and other intersectoral partners;

5. Adjustment to hybrid models of culture by ensuring that the support to digital art must be not only reactionary but sustained and on-going;

6. Always work bottom up, engaging artists and users, to ensure that local community needs and priorities for cultural and creative services are included in the municipal and regional strategies for sector support, capacity building and development in the digitization process.

Recommendations to EU:

1. Provide financial support to cultural events, cultural institutions and artists not only during difficult times, thus they would be immune to face financial challenges;

2. Adapt the EU policy on culture in considering dynamics and cohesion to culture accessibility;

3. Create an exchange platform (similar to the COVID-19 exchanged platform created by European Committee of the Regions) that would share the good practices in terms of digital culture;

4. Promote cultural sector by EU institutions by highlighting cultural events and programmes in local regions which may now be accessible through digital platforms;

5. Encourage partnerships and collaboration between regions in terms of cultural and creative services in cross-border accessibility and cooperation.
In 2018, the EU took a step forward in the field of education. Having seen the great digital transformation which the world was going through and the positive aspects of its implementation – enhancing creativity and flexibility, while also improving efficiency and learning outcomes -, the Union implemented the Digital Education Action Plan. Its main goal was ensuring the adequate development of children and young people's digital competences. At the same time, this would help them access the best opportunities in a labour market that was becoming more and more digitalised. Hence, these policies would have as final outcome a more inclusive and cohesive society. Nevertheless, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, some problems were evidenced. A lack of digital infrastructure and equipment, as well as a lack of digital competences were identified.

Some of these challenges have been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many were even exacerbated. This is why within the Mind the Digital Gap project stakeholders from all levels were invited in order to discuss what can be done in order to bridge the digital gap. In a sense, the lockdown many of us experienced was a trial run – one that showed us what must change in order to fully prepare for a digital transition in education and what mistakes should be avoided.

The sudden need to shift the whole education process to online platforms exposed the unpreparedness of our education system for this challenge. It was made evident that there were lacks in terms of both resources and training. According to the report done by the Education, Audio-visual and Culture Executive Agency (hereinafter Eurydice), Digital Education at School in Europe, there are some aspects regarding teachers' training that are keeping an adequate development of digital education from running smoothly. An example of it would be the lack of a clear definition of what digital competences are. Although in 2/3 of the European education systems teacher-specific competences are recognised in a common framework, the definition of a digital competence depends on the system as such, hence, on national governments. When the assessment of these competences is so broad, it becomes difficult to ensure the same level of digital education for teachers and, consequently, for children in the EU.

Teachers across Europe were obliged to move all their classes online, sometimes in the space of a single day. This meant that many were not trained well enough to use digital tools in order to be able to carry out their duties effectively and efficiently. Similarly, students were not trained either, nor in the digital tools to be used nor in the new methodology that was to be implemented. In fact, the places that managed to achieve a smooth transition were those who already had measures in place working towards digitisation, such as Oulu, Finland (case study addressed in ‘practices’ section).

The challenge of teacher training, however, was not the only one jeopardizing a smooth digital transition. Teachers have gone through a very difficult situation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only due to the lack of training in digital tools, but also because of methodological problems. According to many attendees of our webinar and workshop, teaching and communication during these months turned out to be very complicated. The traditional way of educating - teachers explaining and students taking notes - has...
proven to be insufficient to ensure an adequate learning process. The sudden need of going fully digitised has emphasized a problem that has been present for many years. While our society has evolved, education hasn’t. This is why there’s a need to develop our methodology to make sure that younger generations are encouraged to learn and develop their knowledge. We have to enable students to improve their competences by learning not only from teachers, but also from various other sources at their disposal.

Moreover, it is important to stress that many of the challenges we have identified are related to a lack of communication and support between educational institutions and LRAs. Teachers in some areas felt that there was a lack of support from their governments, since they received no guidance on several aspects such as which platforms to use, how to juggle the workload of teaching a class, training in digital tools, researching which tools to use, etc. As a matter of fact, according to the Eurydice report mentioned above, top-level regulations or recommendations on the assessments of teachers’ digital competences exist in less than ¼ of the education system. This problem could be tackled with better communication channels that would allow those working on the ground to be able to tell policy makers in which way they can be best supported.

Many regions have struggled with inadequate resources of varying degrees, from lack of computers at home to lack of regular electricity. To solve these issues, they needed access to funds. In some regions, funds were simply insufficient, yet in others, funds were available but inaccessible. Institutions and local and regional authorities (LRAs) did not possess the expertise needed to navigate the complicated legal systems that would give them access to national and European funding. For instance, in the city of Turin (case study), communication across government sectors allowed them to identify which funds could be allocated to help digitise education, but also what legal, political and social support students and teachers needed.

In order to truly digitise in an efficient way, communication and cooperation between different stakeholders is essential. Strong relationships between the different actors – students, teachers, school management, LRAs, EU institutions – allow for a full picture of needs and opportunities to emerge.

We must also recognise that the educational experience during the lockdown was an extreme scenario. Going fully digital all of a sudden is considerably more difficult than progressively integrating digital tools and new methodology in the classroom. The pandemic gave us a necessary push to digitise, though we must not forget that the goal is not to take all classes online. Students (both at school and in vocational training centres) have pointed out that they enjoy using digital tools, but not exclusively. Thus, it is necessary to find a middle ground that allows us to digitise without forgetting that educational centres are also places to form relationships with our communities.

**PRACTICES**

Many Local and Regional Authorities have tried to cope with the challenges above during the last months, with some of them implementing concrete measures to bridge the digital divide. This section will illustrate some of these regional and local initiatives, while covering the three case studies explained in the Education webinar session which took place on 11 June.

**Advancing towards digital education through collaboration and innovation**

The city of Turin (IT) has been actively promoting forward-looking initiatives in the education domain, seeking to shape the future of education by investing in digitisation programmes and enhancing cross-border cooperation in this field.

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Thanks to a collaboration with “Fondazione per la Scuola”, the project “Riconnessioni” was launched, which aimed at converting schools into a social transformation hub and building a solid community of teachers, parents and students to discuss the future of teaching. The core of the project was promoting innovative ideas and practices through a continuous training path in which technologies are not the goal, but the means to improve curricular teaching. “Riconnessioni” supports the investment in infrastructure to accompany schools in a process of innovation with fiber optic broadband and fast and neutral networks. In the framework of the LEA project (Learning Technologies Accelerator), the City of Turin has developed the Educational Lab, a space designed to contribute to the development of the innovation market in the education sector, encourage innovative teaching methods that meet the needs of each student, rethink school spaces and experiment with learning tools that could connect students with local structures dedicated to culture and education.

In addition, Turin was also the first UNESCO Italian Learning City and is a keen supporter of the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities as a way of boosting a widespread collective awareness on the shared challenges of the education sector. Turin has adopted the learning city concept to exchange ideas on good practices, foster networking and mutual learning, and promote the development of a local network for lifelong learning.

Quality recommendations for distance learning

In order to ensure the proper functioning of distance learning, the city of Oulu (FI) introduced the quality recommendations produced by the OpenDigi project. This is a developer community created with public funding which aims to strengthen teachers' expertise in digital pedagogy and support students’ learning skills by combining the research-based expertise of teacher education institutions with the development work of schools.

These recommendations are meant to clarify the responsibilities and rights of the various parties involved in the distance learning system - teachers, students, but also guardians. Emphasis was placed on allowing the best use of e-learning and digital tools, while still allowing students to learn beyond the screen. With teaching happening simultaneously or asynchronously, teachers should be available for the students’ and parents’ needs but are also entitled to receive professional support. The digital leap in Oulu took place in just one day after the lockdown decree thanks to, among others: the embracement of digitisation as a part of school life in Finland, the extensive support received by teachers from city school offices and their hard work, together with the familiarity of students with learning technologies and the possession of the required digital devices.

**QUALITY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISTANCE LEARNING**

1. Students have the right to receive daily support from their teachers for their learning
2. Students have the right to talk to their teacher and receive verbal feedback on their work
3. Students have the right to feel part of the classroom community
4. Guardians have the right to learn about the plans for schoolwork in time
5. Guardians have the right to be informed about the success of their child’s work
6. Teachers have the right to professional support and peaceful conditions for teaching
7. Teachers have the right to feel part of the school community

*Figure 7:* Quality recommendations for distance learning
*Source: OpenDigi*
Forward-looking teachers across EU

The use of digital tools has a huge potential to boost student’s motivation and learning outcomes both in the classroom and at home. Outstanding results have already been observed by forward-looking teachers who have been applying these techniques over the years. One example is Manel Trenchs Mola, an Art History teacher in Mataró (ES), whose progressive introduction of digital tools and contents in his lecture, has now facilitated an effective transition to distance learning. As previously highlighted, the training of both teachers and students and the adaptation of the learning methods to get the most out of these tools is, therefore essential to generate the required skills and resources to ensure effective teaching in distance learning scenarios, but it comes as the result of a lasting learning process. Public administrations can make a real difference by supporting teachers and schools in addressing these digital gaps and adapting to the education of the twenty-first century.

AN OVERVIEW OF ADDITIONAL PRACTICES

Digital School Pack - Baden-Württemberg (DE)

The government will double the €65m coming to the region from the federal program “Digital School Pack” in order to provide around 300,000 digital devices to public and private schools. The aim is that all students who do not have a computer at home can borrow a notebook or tablet, with the initiative supporting around 20% of all students in the region. However, the €130m will not only flow into devices but also into an educational framework for digital teaching. The regional government is working with the Centre for School Quality and Teacher Training (ZSL) and the State Media Center to develop a concept for appropriate teacher training, making also technical programs and tools available to teachers and schools. The region is also working to provide solutions in terms of Internet connections at home. Find more information here.

Île-de-France region (FR)

The regional government created in 2017 a digital work environment (monlycee.net), completely accessible on smartphones, which was enriched since confinement with a web-conference module to allow students to follow their lessons remotely. Digital classrooms were introduced offering an online database and a communication tool for parents, teachers and children. In addition, the region also launched a free online language course tool (qioz.fr). With the support of EU funding, 50% of high schools became fully digitally compatible already last year and 200,000 pupils received tablets and laptops. Find more information here.

Semantic Web Amarauna - Basque Country (ES)

In the face of the emergency situation created by COVID-19, the government of the Basque Country decided to create a new semantic platform (Semantic Web Amarauna) aimed at non-university teachers to allow them to create and share digital educational content. This content is opened to the public and, therefore, can be downloaded by teachers but also by families and any other interested party. In addition, the regional government has also launched a virtual educational space (Bitartean, etxetik ikaste) to strengthen education, particularly among students with lack of technological support. The program targeted students between 6 and 10 years old, and was televised in a regional television channel during the lockdown. Find more information here.

Madrid Region (ES):

An agreement was reached with the editorial Grupo Planeta to provide teachers, students, families and education centres with access to its comprehensive digital educational platform. Online training and further support was made available to teachers to get the most out of the platform. The region also provided 2,000 SIM cards and 1,000 tablets to disadvantaged families. Find more information here.
Université Libre de Bruxelles compiled a list of online resources for children aged from 6 to 18 years old, related to formal education, information on COVID-19 and fun activities. It also organised a webinar for university teaching staff on the best online teaching practices. Find more information here.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are the results of the fruitful and interactive debates held during the two-day event, combined with YFactor Education team members’ personal experiences and backgrounds:

Recommendations for Local and Regional Authorities:

- Development of networks composed by local and regional education system stakeholders with the aim to bridge the communication gap between teachers and Local and Regional Authorities in order to adequately address the challenges of the sector.
- Support the further development of teachers’ digital skills and competences in order to improve the use of digital tools and their implementation into a teaching methodology also adapted to potential distance learning scenarios.
- Increase the access to technology and internet connection, particularly among students from disadvantaged backgrounds and from rural or marginal areas.
- Providing guidelines for students, families, teachers and trainers to ensure an adequate education while guaranteeing the well-being of all actors.

Recommendations for the EU:

- Creation of a European label that certifies data protection, accessibility and pedagogical use for digital platforms to be easily used by teachers and students. It is intended to help educational staff to choose a certain digital tool to carry on with distance education, while ensuring user security, its availability to all actors and its correct functioning in the area of pedagogy.
- Development of an EU platform to promote the exchange of knowledge, experiences and good practices; while ensuring that resources are adequately allocated to strengthen schools and teachers.
- Recognition of the importance of addressing the digital gap in the education sector, allocating the required attention and resources in the European Recovery Plan.
Beyond ICT (Information and Communications Technology) tools: Reversing negative indicators

When it comes to civic participation, it is impossible to discuss digitalisation without mentioning the eye-opening period of the COVID-19 lockdown. For more than three months, some regional elections had to be postponed (e.g. 2020 Municipal Elections in France) and administration services were highly affected by the lockdown. During this period, many public authorities and local and regional representatives relied on digital tools to ensure administrative continuity but, unfortunately, not everyone could benefit from the implemented digital alternatives. Nonetheless, the COVID-19 lockdown did not showcase anything new. It only highlighted already existing limits in our society.

Some quick figures illustrate this statement.

In countries like Romania, Portugal and Greece, 25% of the population does not use the internet (Eurostat 2019). Furthermore, in a study recently published (November 2019) and carried out by the INSEE in France, one person in five in that country is unable to communicate via the Internet. In some regions in Europe, the share of people (aged 16-74) interacting with public authorities over the internet is low compared with the European average.

The above-mentioned negative indicators are quite revealing. But they were already factual before the pandemic. The potential amount of people unable to exercise their right of political participation digitally is substantial and these figures shouldn’t be overlooked. Moreover, this divide can lead to devastating consequences, where the most vulnerable ones are once again the main victims and are, therefore, discarded from the decision-making process. During the Mind the Digital Gap event, these negative indicators were the starting point of the discussion and laid out the foundations for the debates. Throughout the events dedicated to the issue of civic participation, many challenges were highlighted and exposed as potential reasons why some countries, regions and cities are currently having difficulties making the digital jump. Given that most indicators are strongly influenced by social and demographic aspects, there is a series of essential pre-conditions that need to be filled in order to make every single citizen participate, not only actively, but also in an efficient and qualitative way.
Keep the democracy and administration alive

The COVID-19 crisis has challenged Europe to maintain democracy and administrations in order to avoid a complete standstill. It is with this idea in mind that the use of digital means to ensure the ongoing of civic and democratic life has been reconsidered.

These challenges for the future of European democracy are not new ones, they have already been pointed out by the initiative “Democracy 4-0” in 2016; this initiative aims to rethink democracy to enhance the inclusion of youngsters in political decision-making by focusing on their needs of transparency-friendly and easy to understand legislative process.

More than trusting our digital solutions, the pressing need to rebuild trust in politics

During the civic participation workshop, one of the participants asked the following accurate question: “What is the real purpose of participation, and what are the side effects that could arise if we go all digital?” Access to tools, broadband width and adequate skills are among the most tangible challenges identified by the speakers. Some cities in Europe still have connection problems, others have low elections turnouts. Given that participation is the end goal, defining what it is expected from it is vital. The main challenge is how to foster interest in participation first and foremost, and then how to ensure an efficient participation. Only then, the issue of how to include ICT and Digital tools in the equation in an inclusive and accessible way can be tackled: are the ICT tools available a viable solution to solve these challenges?

Currently, digitalisation and the digital space are seen as comfort rather than necessity. A basic infrastructure is urgently needed to efficiently implement digital tools in our society as a whole. It must be conceived to reach all the stratum of our society.

Estonia has made access to the Internet a top priority since 2000. In 2007, on the occasion of the , internet voting was a reality for the first time in the world. But even Estonia was explicit not to move fully to online participation.

As discussed during the civic participation workshop, there is still scepticism regarding digital participation and it is a challenge to build digital trust. Up until now, both citizens and politicians considered digital solutions as complementary to our current electoral and participatory systems. In order to completely shift to a new digital environment, time, training and other material conditions (such as affordable housing or access to ICT tools) are needed. But more than technical capabilities, what is really needed is political willingness to integrate our citizens actively and efficiently in the decision-making process. Trust is a both side process that needs to be part of the policies implemented.

A specific concern in this regard is the inclusion of vulnerable minority groups, like homeless, migrants or Roma given their particular precariousness. Ensuring that their voices are heard requires special efforts from all the political authorities. For instance, it is possible to create representativeness through advocacy groups acting as the voice of the minority. Hypothetically, these groups could be part of a so-called “Wisdom
Council”, that would give a way for minorities to express their position to the competent political authorities.

Regions, cities and most importantly Member States must have the political will to act and give their citizens the conditions to actively participate in our democracy. Purpose could indeed be important to determine the role of ICT tools and how digitalisation must move forward. The solutions to these challenges might just be among the best practices presented by the speakers that intervened at the *Mind the Digital Gap* event.

What policies should be put in place in order to enable the most disadvantaged - who are the least connected due to lack of computer skills and usually the ones unable to acquire digital equipment - to participate in democratic life and to be able to access the services to which they are entitled as citizens?

**PRACTICES**

Creation of a participatory platform

An approach to tackle the previously named challenges, gaining more and more attention from the political and societal side, is the tool of a participatory platform: this mechanism allows a greater number of citizens to participate in decision-making and to directly influence their nearest environment without being present in a community council meeting for example. In general, a participatory platform creates a dialogue between political decision-makers and the population via digital or analogue tools. The aim is to get in touch with the population and to stimulate the debate on communal projects. The tools used vary in a wide range: from purely digital platforms with discussion forums and online voting to hybrid combinations of face-to-face events and online debates. The latter variant is preferred, especially in the initial phase of a project, since trust must first be established between the parties involved.

Citizens of the 21st century still have to get used to the new possibilities of co-determination and often prefer to first seek personal contact with the people behind the platform. For the organisers, it is therefore a challenge to convince people of the added value and functionality of the online tool. Hence, when building the tools and platforms the aim should be to create an ecosystem built without hierarchy logic - as the goal is to have people as decision-makers. It shall ensure constant dialogue as it is important for trust building and efficiency of the system to have a permanent process. To maximise trust building several strategies could be of help. For instance, events for population to meet with executive/government/public administration could favour proximity between the different actors of the process⁹. To push the two-sides trust building, further training and education to decision-making should be provided to the people. Having a platform aiming at full transparency and providing feedback allowing people to understand the outcome of their decisions is important to ensure participatory tools success.

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) underlines the different challenges which can occur when setting up a participatory platform. First, it is problematic to choose the tool. The success of a digital tool highly depends on the appropriateness of the used method. Since there is a large market for these tools, some stakeholders lose the overview and go for a tool which does not meet the population’s needs. If the technology does not fit the audience, the project is doomed to fail. In a second step, after having identified the best tool, administration and civil society must be trained to create comprehension for and trust in the platform on the long term. A technical trap often appearing in this context is the non-respect of civic feedback. Successfully organizing an online platform in the long run requires a regular evaluation on all sides. Often, however, the suggestions and comments of users are

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⁹ Brussels-Capital Region has held open doors events for people to see how public administration works. Some LRAs in Europe have held meetings with Roma communities to foster trust building in the public institutions.
not sufficiently taken into account. This can lead to frustration and previously motivated participants turn away from the project. To avoid this, FRA recommends communicating feedback transparently. This approach pays respect to all sides and contributes to a successful digital co-determination. For further information about FRA’s proposals for the successful organisation of civic participation, please contact the organisation via the contact form.

The Belgian Commune of Watermael-Boitsfort, for example, was aware of these aspects when setting up its own digital citizen consultation platform. Watermael-Boitsfort organised information events to present the new inclusive tool and to highlight the advantages for the individual to participate in the online vote.

The platform invites citizens to bring up projects they would like to see implemented, to discuss submitted ideas and to vote themselves about the way the community’s participatory budget is spent. Registration on the platform is free for citizens. Nevertheless, in the beginning, the project faced a lack of trust on both sides, on the civic and administrative one.

The administration experienced technical difficulties which led to concerns whether the tool will really be able to become a reliable mechanism to get in touch with the population. Training for the administrative body was needed to solve these challenges. Additionally, it was questioned whether the population will agree on using the new platform. Concerns regarding the integration of all age groups were mentioned. Obviously, training was also needed for the population to become familiar with the platform. Concerns regarding the integration of all age groups were mentioned. Obviously, training was also needed for the population to become familiar with the platform. Thus, the community took a hybrid approach, combining the digital tool with several explanatory events for the population. Today, the successful project creates an added value for life in the community. The concept is well-developed and can be transferred to other European municipalities. For further information, please contact this address.

A second example for a success story of participatory platforms is the project "Catalan ecosystem of civic participation: Open infrastructure for community building" in the Autonomous Community of Catalonia in Spain. The project is embedded in a nationwide strategy, involving actors at all levels of decision-making whose aim is to attain a continuous dialogue between administrations and citizens. The goal is achieved by transforming the administration to enable citizen participation and by promoting synergies between public bodies. Therefore, a platform to manage civic participation and online consultation was implemented. It is a virtual meeting space for all stakeholders working in the field of civic participation, like parties, administrations, and NGOs. The task of the tool is to encourage the administration and organisers of civic participation to exchange their knowledge, provide information and point out possible challenges. Common training is also organised to foster exchange about tools and methods. In this context, the role of technology is explicitly pointed out out.

The method used to gather civic opinions is never neutral and must be chosen wisely. Depending on the choice, a specific group of citizens may be excluded from the process – and this group is not always automatically that of the older inhabitants. Thus, the exchange also revolves around the question of which digital tool can reach most citizens. In order to make those platforms work it is important to ensure authentication through technological means recognised by the State as eID (electronic ID). The method must always be adapted to the specific conditions and needs of a region. This precondition is crucial to fulfil the expectation towards the participatory platform: to improve the efficacy and efficiency of public policies, and to foster a shift towards a techno-political paradigm of collective action. For further information, please contact this address.
Building a digital ecosystem as much inclusive as possible

In order to tackle the previously exposed issues exacerbated by COVID-19 crisis, some elements were pressingly needed to build a sufficiently democratic digital environment.

A first step in ensuring that everyone can be part of the digital transition is ensuring the access to ICT (Information Communication Technology) tools and means. However, those being relatively expensive, part of the population cannot afford them. Nevertheless, it is not impossible to improve material accessibility to the digital universe.

In order to tackle the lack of tools and access to computers, Objectif100, a Brussels initiative, decided to make a change by relying upon circular economy principles. Basically, they have been able to collect companies’ computers getting to the end of leasing contract terms. They also have issued calls through various platforms to collect computers and tablets from private actors as well. Most notably, they have reached those actors through municipalities, by working with them to see what were the needs at local levels and what were the companies established on their territories they could contact. Once collected, the ICT tools were refurbished and distributed to students based on specific criteria. The Objectif100 initiative has been able to provide those computers at very low costs. At the end, more than a thousand computers were provided and around forty institutes have relied upon this initiative.

This undertaking shows there are ways to ensure access to ICT tools to a larger amount of people with little costs — economic and environmental costs, as the computers are either given or bought back at residual value and that it avoid waste of ICT tools, which also avoid stimulating market demand for new ones and reduce ecological externalities. Moreover, circular economy logic makes this initiative a long-term investment, as the tools, once used to reach the desired outcome — passing exams and attending classes in the case at stake — can be taken back and reused by someone else. Furthermore, this initiative is easy to reproduce anywhere, as there are people and companies switching regularly to more up-to-date technologies and no longer need the former ones. What may appear obsolete to some is often still operational and very useful for others to achieve their tasks. In order to make it a success, a structural approach is needed to ensure collecting, refurbishing and distributing.

The all project appears to require a lot of expenses. Nevertheless, in adopting the circular economy approach will create benefits. Aside from helping people in need — creating social benefit, it ensures jobs within the structure of the initiative and embeds the undertaking in a sustainable development perspective.

Once made sure people have the tools, other bridges will perhaps be needed. Indeed, some households do not have broadband access or the quality of it is very poor. There exist several options to deal with this matter. For instance, as above mentioned Watermael-Boitsfort has relied upon an hybrid solution10. It is possible to rely on policies aiming at having free Wi-Fi in public areas. However, in times of health crisis, where lockdown measures are enforced, limiting the building of a democratic digital environment to that measure could be problematic. Hence, it could be interesting to take into account the categories of individuals lacking access to broadband and remedy it to ensure maximum inclusiveness. For instance, if economically impaired people are the most concerned, providing free Wi-Fi in social housing could be a solution or providing SIM card with data connection rationing per day11 lasting as long as lockdown measures are on. It shall be borne in mind that to launch such policies and reach such results, a certain shift of perspective regarding digitalisation and digital space is needed. In fact, some countries like Estonia have been able to achieve a large digitalisation of public services thanks to governments’ and political will to have democratic digital space, adopting the view that accessing the digital world is a fundamental right and that it should be considered as a basic public infrastructure.

10 Hybrid solutions (e.g. contacting people by telephone) are a bit more time demanding but are needed to avoid ending up in the extreme opposite of the full participation goal due to lack of inclusivity
11 For instance in some countries telephone operators offer unlimited datas per month but with limited high speed connection per day (see to that effect this Japanese initiative and French initiative)
Tools and connection ensured, it is important to bear in mind that people may lack digital literacy or not feel comfortable using ICT means. Hence, the tool used shall either be user-friendly – when coding and developing them, the target audience shall be anticipated to ensure maximum inclusiveness – and/or training shall be ensured. For instance, it seems today that more people have access to a smartphone than a computer, therefore developing solutions made for those tools would be probably of greater relevance to ensure maximum inclusivity. Also, the tools must be developed with the purpose in mind, to guarantee efficiency and effectiveness, which the end-users shall perceive. Nevertheless, all the Y Factor civic participation webinar panellists agreed on it, people may be comfortable with part of technologies but may still face “uneasiness” regarding the tool used to ensure education or participative democracy. Thus, a learning process is also needed to make sure the digital gap does not evolve to become a gap in other fields of human life (e.g. education, politics, public participation, economic life, etc.).

Training will require some HR cost at first, but, if adopting a long-run perspective, it is possible to reproduce such a model at school. Having schools using those tools to create a participative decision-making process would reduce the HR costs in the future. Ensuring people familiarisation with the tools and the digital universe would raise up the odds in favour of a successful initiative. It takes time to engage with people and for them to become used to and take the habit of going on digital platforms but those recommendations are key to shorten the policy timeline.

AN OVERVIEW OF ADDITIONAL PRACTICES

**EU**

The European Commission supports communities which aim to provide their citizens with free Wi-Fi in public space. Municipalities can apply for €15,000 of funding for the project. There are no specific conditions for eligibility. Find more information [here](#).

**En Première Ligne (FR)**

This service exchange platform was launched during confinement. It consists of putting volunteers in touch with people in need of help, whether it is medical staff who need help with everyday services such as childcare or people who are not able to go out for shopping or other needs. This platform has made it possible to create solidarity within the society. Find more information [here](#).

**Tallinn (EE)**

The Estonian governments have conducted major investments in the digitalisation of the society since the 1990s. Thus, many bureaucratic activities and political decisions are organised online. The digital strategy was successful and made the country one of the digital leaders in the European Union. Find more information [here](#).

**Narita Airport (JP)**

The Japanese project aims to facilitate foreigners’ access to SIM cards with unlimited data and therefore to allow them to become part of the digital society. This project allows foreigners to accelerate the complicated bureaucratic process of acquiring a SIM card, also by providing service in English. Find more information [here](#).

**Tangerhütte (DE)**

The German municipality Tangerhütte implemented a digital town hall to ensure administrative processes can also be done out of opening hours. Citizens, associations and companies have an online account and can request services on the platform. The project will soon be extended from the local level to the federal state level in Saxony-Anhalt. Find more information [here](#).
CitizenLab is a Brussels-based initiative advising local governments in citizens’ participation. The team helps to identify possible tools to reach more citizens and to organise political decision-making as inclusive as possible online. The organisation works with a wide range of tools and supports communities in finding the most appropriate one. Find more information here.

Démocratie ouverte, which is the French translation for Open Democracy, is an online platform that aims to give the opportunity for initiatives of all kinds to connected and be exposed on the platform, in order to give them a better visibility and contribute to build a more transparent and participatory democracy. Find more information here.

La MedNum

This initiative launched in 2017 aims to participate in a more inclusive digital transition. In addition to help the decision-makers to follow and implement the digital transition on a daily basis, this platform has helped people without digital skills to learn how to manage digital tasks. During the confinement, in cooperation with the French State Secretariat for Digital Affairs, the platform created a website and a telephone platform to accompany citizens in their digital needs. Find more information here.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This short overview about possible ways to ensure inclusive civic participation presented in the webinar and workshop shows that some common principles must be considered. The challenge of reaching every single citizen can be overcome by concentration on three crucial aspects: transparent communication, regular training and mutual respect.

In general, the implementation of a new project requires efforts to present the advantages to all stakeholders. Citizens must gain the impression that their voice is seriously taken into account, not only regarding the outcome of the project but also regarding its design.

The latter point highlights the need for regular training on both sides, the population one and the administrative one. Training fights digital illiteracy and makes people feel more comfortable with a new project.

The end result of these attempts is mutual respect between the organisator and the population, which is the basis for successful civic engagement.
In the previous sections, the specific challenges for each area of interest have been identified together with the changes the use of digital tools has brought about in the three fields of culture, education and civic participation. However, going into more detail on what has been discussed, it is possible to identify the following common challenges relatively to the three topics:

- difficult access for users in terms of technical resources (broadband) and skills
- audience fatigue due to the accumulation of online activities and huge discrepancies between the physical and virtual experience potentially leading to a loss of interest
- lack of governmental support because of an unforeseen increase of financial needs accompanying the digital transition
- unreadiness for a shift to a completely digital universe

Despite these heavy challenges, digitalisation offers many opportunities in the three fields addressed in the Mind the Digital Gap project. Indeed, digitalisation, from the culture sector perspective, is actually opening the door to wider dissemination of cultural content. Regarding education, having to go digital has put in the spotlight that changes were needed for the learning and teaching processes to strive for greater modernity. When it comes to civic participation, the transition to a digital universe is favouring reaching out to the youth. This very unique ambivalence of digitalisation is what makes it interesting to invest in to provide services that have the potential to be accessible to a great amount of people.

In order to ensure successful digitalisation it is important to bear in mind some cross-sectoral recommendations:

- ensuring facilitation of digital access technologically and infrastructure-wise
- responding to stakeholders’ needs by developing tools and means according to flexible and agile approach in order to adapt to each and every situation
- providing training on regular basis for all types of stakeholders
- maintaining hybrid platform as going fully digital could have adverse effects
- creating platforms to share initiatives across EU regions

**YFACTOR TEAM**

- The Mind the Digital Gap project has been developed by a group of 16 Trainees of the European Committee of the Regions.

- Despite the exceptional circumstances and the massive teleworking situation, we are proud of the great results we achieved with our online series of events and we aim at getting an even stronger impact with this handbook by reaching out a very large audience that, hopefully, will profit of the presented digital challenges, practices and recommendations in the fields of culture, education and civic participation.
Our internal organisation can be summarised in the following scheme:

**ADMINISTRATION**  
Theresa Seitz, Ana Gabriele Sabancevaite, Maria Irene Ferri  
Main responsibilities:  
- Coordination  
- Setting main deadlines and milestones  
- Internal communication

**COMMUNICATION**  
Jaime Crespo Bris, Simona Baloghova, Gokay Cinar, Maria Irene Ferri  
Main responsibilities:  
- Social Media Management  
- Content creation  
- Audience outreach

**IT**  
Simona Baloghova, Nikolaos Gerantonis  
Main responsibilities:  
- Tool research  
- Testing  
- Smooth running of the event

**CULTURE**  
Tadhg Browne, Ana Gabriele Sabancevaite, Catalina Birsanu  
Main responsibilities:  
- Research  
- Stakeholder Management  
- Workshop design and facilitation

**EDUCATION**  
Claudio Vidal Pedros, Yulia Konstantinova, Claudia Fernandez, Maddalena Milan  
Main responsibilities:  
- Research  
- Stakeholder Management  
- Workshop design and facilitation

**CIVIC PARTICIPATION**  
Ruben Felix, Theresa Seitz, Eliot Sanam Ilung, Aliya Aïssou  
Main responsibilities:  
- Research  
- Stakeholder Management  
- Workshop design and facilitation

**COMMUNICATION**

**IT**

**CULTURE**

**EDUCATION**

**CIVIC PARTICIPATION**

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**Figure 9:** Organigramme of the YFactor team

**Figure 10:** YFactor team members
We, as a group of Trainees at the European Committee of the Regions who worked on this project, would like to thank all of our speakers and participants who joined the *Mind the Digital Gap* online event on 11-12 June 2020.

**Figure 11:** Culture speakers

For Culture series of events, we would like to give our special thanks to Gytiš Dovydašius (Lecturer and creative at Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas), Kieran McCarthy (Member of a Local Executive, Cork City Council), Marilyn Gaughan-Reddan (Head of Programme, Galway Capital of Culture 2020) and William Fitzgerald (Artistic Director, Galway Film Fleadh) for their participation as speakers and contributing to digitising culture and bridging the digital divide: local strategies for inclusivity, accessibility and sustainability. Special thanks go to Kaunas Chambers Theatre for active participation and sharing of good practices during the workshop.

**Figure 12:** Education speakers
For Education webinar and workshop, we would like to warmly thank **Isabella Calvagna** (EU Project Coordinator and Translator for the Education Department, Turin City Council), **Satu Haapanen** (City Councillor, Chair of the Education and Culture Board, City of Oulu), **Manel Trenchs Mola** (Art History Teacher at Escola Pia Santa Anna, Mataró) for their benignant knowledge on challenges and solutions to boost an inclusive digital transition across Europe in this field.

![Image of Civic Participation speakers](image)

**Figure 13:** Civic Participation speakers

Lastly, for Civic Participation topic, we sincerely thank **Ismael Peña López** (Director General of Citizen Participation and Electoral Processes at the Government of Catalonia), **Cathy Clerbaux & Oumou Zé** (Echevine of Participation, Energy, Green spaces and Public Cleanliness & Coordinator for Citizens’ Participation at Watermael-Boitsfort municipality), **Taoufik Amzile** (Co-founder of Objectif100 and Chairman of LEAD Belgium), Citizen K (Founder of "Democracy 4.0) for their participation as speakers to express their thoughts on challenges and digital solutions for democratic participation, engagement and solidarity in times of crisis.

A special thank goes also to **Colombe Cahen-Salvador** (co-founder and co-executive director of NOW!, co-founder and former policy lead of Volt Europa) who brilliantly conducted the Civic Participation webinar.
Created in 1994, after the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty, the European Committee of the Regions is the EU's assembly of 329 regional and local representatives from all 27 Member States, representing over 447 million Europeans. Its main objectives are to involve regional and local authorities and the communities they represent in the European Union's decision-making process and to inform them about EU policies. The European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council have to consult the Committee in policy areas affecting regions and cities. It can appeal to the Court of Justice of the European Union as a means of upholding EU law where there are breaches to the subsidiarity principle or failures to respect regional or local authorities.