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Helping Asia's Elderly to Become Digital Citizens

This needs an urgent 'whole-of-society' approach.

By Wee-Kiat Lim



Pechara Voracharusungsri, a 70-year-old Bangkok native, uses social media and an instant messaging app to shop online twice a month.¹ This is a considerable jump in commitment from when she shopped online only a few times a year before the pandemic. Meanwhile, other elderly may find the blazing pace of digital technology enhancements disruptive and disconcerting. The experience of 65-year-old Chinese national Guo Zhichao reflects this sentiment. Recounting how he and his wife had to seek help with using their smartphone to order food during their first vacation since the COVID-19 crisis, he lamented, "I used to travel when I was young, but after that trip, I felt intimidated by travel for the first time in my life."²

Indeed, the promise and perils brought on by the wave of digital transformation in recent years present a mixed bag for Asia, with the effects becoming increasingly salient since 2020. There is cause for optimism and concern about how ready Asians, especially the elderly, are to meet the digital challenges head on. While many Asians aged 65 or older are becoming more tech-savvy, compared to say five years ago, the sheer number of Asians entering the silver age might spell trouble for many societies. To highlight, by 2060, there will be more than 1.2 billion Asian elderly, comprising 10 percent of the global population.³ This staggering figure means that over the next four decades, the number of Asians entering this age band is expected to triple. Of these, the majority will come from East and South Asia, where the world's two most populous nations, China and India, are located respectively.

The issue of gender could also further compound the digital divide challenge that is already cleaved along age. For example, in India, particularly in rural areas, only heads of households—who are predominantly male—own a digital device. As a result, women, especially older ones, have to depend on male family members for Internet access.⁴ In Southeast Asia alone, due to factors such as disability, lack of access to capital,

and illiteracy, in addition to old age, as much as 31 percent of the population or 150 million individuals are already being disadvantaged in the digital age.⁵ There is clearly an urgency to improve digital literacy.

But first, what is digital literacy?

ENABLING DIGITAL LITERACY

In a nutshell, digital literacy refers to the ability to understand and use digital technologies, such as the Internet, social media, and smart devices. It enables one not just to survive but also thrive in a world that is not only increasingly digital, but also preferring digital. For instance, the newspapers that you buy off the shelf at the convenience store today are likely 'frozen' from what was filed yesterday, compared to their 'live' and updated version online. Likewise, consumers are getting used to pre-ordering the latest smartphones online even before they are stocked up in brick-and-mortar stores.

Such a 'digital-first' environment compels the elderly to be digitally competent in order to access timely and accurate information online. They must navigate performing day-to-day digital tasks smoothly, such as transacting online for products and services; making appointments; communicating through online messaging, sending files, and participating in virtual meetings. In the event of technology failure, they should also be able to perform basic troubleshooting on their devices before seeking help from friends and family.

Preparing elderly Asians to be digitally literate may foster their confidence and, more importantly, their willingness to adopt digital behaviour. This could significantly reduce the demand for offline services in sectors such as healthcare and retail—which is particularly salient as the largest group of users excluded from the digital realm across societies is the elderly. Furthermore, digital literacy can also help the elderly stay connected with their families and communities. By being able to use digital technologies, such as the messaging app that

Pechara uses to shop online, the elderly can stay in touch with loved ones, especially younger family members who are digital natives, and remain part of the latter's social lives even when they cannot share the same physical space.


NOT JUST 'THE GOVERNMENT'S JOB'

Governments have a prominent role in raising the digital literacy of the elderly. In addition to setting policies, the public sector could also take the lead in implementing initiatives. In Singapore, the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) launched Seniors Go Digital, and its learning programmes are organised into three tiers. The first is using basic communication tools including messaging, the second is making video calls, and the third is accessing government digital services and becoming comfortable using e-payment tools at locations they frequent, such as markets and hawker centres.⁶

However, the IMDAs of the world and the public sector can only do so much. In order to address a challenge of this magnitude, we need to take a 'whole-of-society' approach to mobilise people's civic-mindedness and public spirit, as well as the business-savviness and entrepreneurial drive of the market, to harness resources for improving digital literacy and inclusion. For example, in India, tech start-ups such as Bengaluru-based Easy Hai and non-profit organisations such as HelpAge India conduct digital literacy workshops for the elderly.⁷ China's major tech firms, estimated to be worth RMB 3.79 trillion (US\$544 billion) in 2020,⁸ have long recognised the huge potential of the elderly market. In fact, as early as 2018, e-commerce giant Alibaba's Taobao had already launched 'family accounts' where young users can help their parents make payments. In another initiative, Alibaba introduced dedicated customer services including live streaming courses to teach the elderly how to shop online. In other instances, Xiaomi, Oppo, and China's other smartphone brands have

introduced 'senior mode' on their devices, which enables elderly-friendly features like larger icons and text, as well as screen-reading tools.⁹

Given the urgency to act, governments, non-profit organisations, and businesses should learn to collaborate in various modes, such as allowing different parties to lead across various domains, despite having their own specific roles to play. For example, the government may assume leadership on policymaking and governance issues, such as cybersecurity. Non-profits, being closer to the ground, may be more effective at identifying critical segments of the vulnerable communities that should be prioritised for access and assistance. For the private sector, it could take the lead in fund-raising, as well as training and partnering with micro, small and medium enterprises to be more competitive in the digital economy.

While we try our best to encourage and provide the most conducive conditions for Asia's elderly to become 'naturalised' digital citizens, we must also remember that the choice ultimately rests with them. We should not let a digital-first world be reduced to a digital-only world. At least not yet. This is where we can take a leaf from the Singapore government's digitalisation efforts—many public agencies offer in-person and contact centre services for citizens who need help with their online services. We must remember there will always be individuals, not necessarily only the elderly, who are not able or simply not interested in joining the digital world. This is where we need to exercise compassion and be truly inclusive. 

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