# Putting people first in digital transformation

- Digital technologies allow people to socialise, relax, learn and engage. But individuals might also encounter illegal and harmful content online, or experience privacy violations, security breaches and inequality.
- For consumers, digital technologies offer more choice and competitive prices. However, they may fall victim to online scams, unsafe products, or deception, exploitation or discrimination.
- The digital environment affects the way people can enjoy their rights and creates new risks for their violation. International, multi-stakeholder and tailored policy efforts are needed to strike a balance between rights, interests and values. Evidence-based policy is needed to ensure a human-centric, rights-oriented digital transformation.

Digital technologies have transformed lives across the globe, offering new ways to communicate, work, shop, participate in public debate, exercise rights and enjoy liberties. But these new opportunities come with new risks. These changes call for policies that put people at the centre of digital transformation and shape an empowering and safe online environment where all, including the more vulnerable, can flourish. Heeding these calls, policy makers and enforcement authorities increasingly focus on protection, empowerment, safety and rights.

Internet users who did not buy online in the last three months due to payment security or privacy concerns
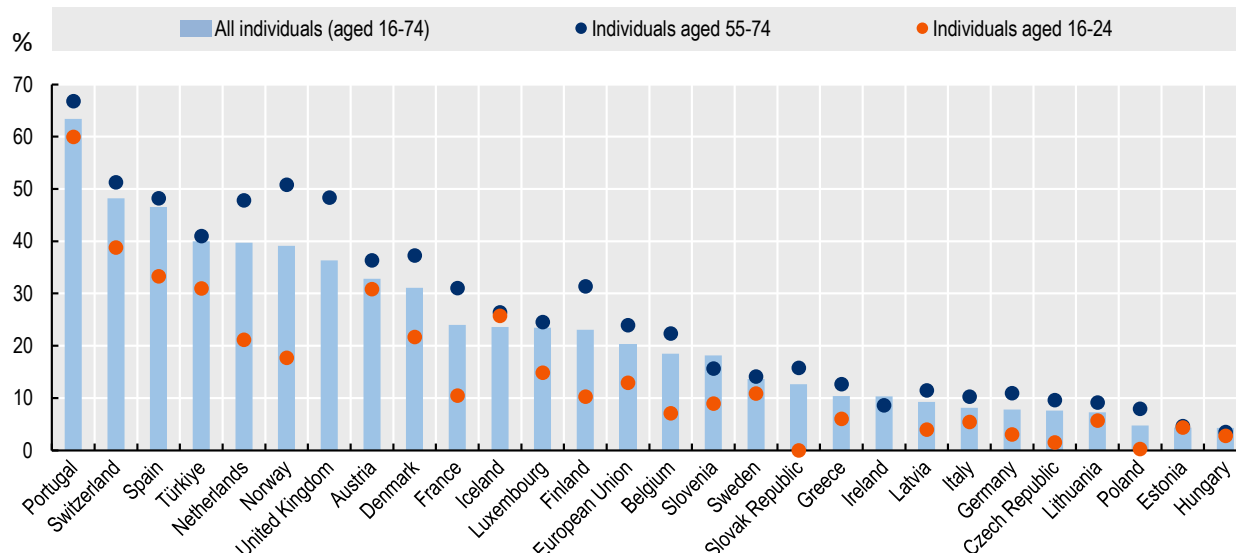
This data is for 2021 or the latest year available and includes those who have never made online purchases. The latest data refer to a recall period of three months prior to being surveyed, though some countries use different periods and they may vary over time. Source: OECD (2022) The OECD *Going Digital Toolkit*, based on the Eurostat Digital Economy and Society Statistics Comprehensive Database.

Digital technologies bring new opportunities

Digital transformation gives people new opportunities as citizens and consumers. Digital tools open up many new and different methods for people to communicate, work, shop, learn and create, participate in democracy, and exercise their rights in the digital age.

For example, digital technologies and data transform civic engagement, enabling people to participate in political activism and interact with governments using digital public services. Consumers online have access to a vast array of products, sellers and information, which digital tools help parse and compare.

Digital technologies also pose new risks

Along with its positive impacts, digital transformation also means new risks for citizens and consumers and can affect vulnerable groups, such as children, in especially harmful ways. For example, consumers online may be affected by unsafe products, phishing and financial fraud. Some firms subvert or impair consumer autonomy via 'dark commercial patterns' in their design of online user interfaces and digital-choice architecture.

Algorithmic reinforcement of content can also contribute to the proliferation of false and misleading information, isolation, bias and the polarisation of ideological positions, negatively affecting public debate. Children online are particularly vulnerable and may face specific harms such as cyberbullying or sexual exploitation and abuse. Efforts to address these risks can pose problems of their own: for example, digital tools can help detect and remove harmful content online, but there are concerns that they could also be discriminatory or might facilitate censorship and surveillance.

Policies need to put people first

Safeguarding the well-being of people online, and ensuring that their rights are protected, is a complex and cross-cutting policy challenge, engaging several policy domains simultaneously. For example, dark patterns, exploitative personalisation practices and algorithmic bias can involve consumer, privacy, competition, artificial intelligence and anti-discrimination policies. Using a 'rights lens' to explore the tensions between individual interests and their online manifestations (e.g. online safety and content-sharing) and to ensuring that human rights remain protected both offline and online in the digital age, is increasingly applied in policymaking efforts.

Navigating these dilemmas requires coordinated, evidence-based policy approaches. While policies, laws and regulations abound – including those standards upheld by the OECD – there is growing recognition of the

need for more comprehensive protection, empowerment, safety and rights online. This will require multi-stakeholder collaboration among policy makers, civil society, and technology and privacy experts. In this context, it is important to consider the role of the private sector in managing online harms, including through potential new obligations, transparency or accountability practices.

Policies should remain coherent across policy domains and borders. The need to address issues that transcend policy and country borders – such as deceptive and fraudulent practices, privacy threats and unsafe products – underscores the importance of cross-border and cross-regulatory cooperation including between privacy and data protection, competition and consumer authorities. More evidence on dark commercial patterns, privacy issues, and online harms for children is needed to inform such efforts.

📅 Related ministerial sessions

- **Rights in the digital age – building solid evidence (workshop)**: 3:30-4:45pm, 14 December 2022
- **Creating a safer online environment (workshop)**: 9:30-10:45am, 15 December 2022
- **Empowering consumers in a digital world**: 11:15-12:30am, 15 December 2022

📖 Further reading

OECD (2022), "Putting people first in digital transformation: Background paper for the CDEP Ministerial meeting", *OECD Digital Economy Papers*, No. 339, OECD Publishing, Paris.

📱 Learn more

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