

***ECHO NETWORK PLEA
for an ETHICAL
and SUSTAINABLE
DIGITAL TRANSITION***

ECHO The logo for ECHO, featuring the word "ECHO" in a bold, italicized, green sans-serif font. The letters "O" and "O" are stylized, with the second "O" being a solid green circle and the final "O" being a green circle filled with a white dot pattern.



ECHO Network Plea for an Ethical and Sustainable Digital Transition



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1. Glossary of Terms

- **Big Tech** : Refers to the biggest and most influential technological companies in the world (e.g. Amazon, Apple, Google, Microsoft, etc.)
- **Digital sobriety** : Digital sobriety, or in French “la sobriété numérique” was coined in 2008 by the association [GreenIT.fr](#) to designate «the approach that consists of designing more sober digital services and moderating one’s daily digital uses».¹
- **Open-source software** : Software whose source code can be studied, modified and redistributed under the same license and can therefore no longer be withdrawn from the community

*1 : EPALE (2021). [Digital sobriety: how can we adapt our uses for a positive impact on the environment?](#)

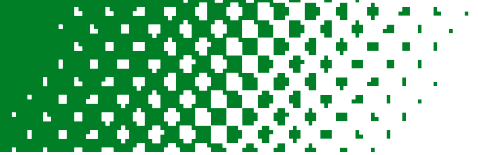
2. ECHO Network : Introduction & Vision

ECHO (Ethical, Common, Human and Open) Network is a project running from January 2023 until November 2024 which intends to promote digital citizenship and responsible use of digital technology, providing citizens and organisations with a clear understanding of how to use digital technology ethically, and focuses on how EU institutions address this matter to safeguard citizens.

The project is coordinated by **CEMÉA** France and its consortium comprises of 7 partner organisations: **CEMÉA Belgique, CEMEA Federazione Italiana, CEMÉA France, Centre for Peace Studies, Framasoft, SOLIDAR Foundation** and **Willi-Eichler-Akademie** based in 5 different countries Belgium, Croatia, France, Germany and Italy.

At the core of ECHO Network lies the aim to engage (young) people in a digital transition towards an ***ethical, responsible, inclusive and sustainable digital space***. The project explored how civil society organisations (CSOs), including youth organisations, can be empowered to understand how our digital society works, and enabled the exchange of practices and shared experiences on the ethical use of digital technologies.

ECHO Network aims to spark a change in practices among staff of organisations, and especially organisations and CSOs addressing youth rights to use more ethical and sustainable digital practices and provide them with the necessary tools to train youth with an ***ethical and sustainable approach to digital technology***. On top of that, the project aimed to raise awareness among organisations and their staff about European policies related to digital and environmental issues and to build a European network of trust between popular education associations, ethical hosting organizations and associative lobbying organizations.



The Digital and the Ethical: A common understanding

The Council of Europe describes digital citizenship as follows: «it refers to the capacity to engage positively, critically and competently in the digital environment, relying on the skills of effective communication and creation, to practice forms of social participation respectful of human rights and dignity through the responsible use of technology.»²

For ECHO Network partners **‘social participation’** and **‘responsible use’** are at the heart of this definition, as they enable people to understand what digital technology is and how to use it ethically, what their place is in this digital society, what options are available, and how the European institutions are addressing this issue to protect citizens in the digital space.

It is crucial for the project partners to point out that the concept of ‘digital citizenship’ is therefore not entirely different or separate from «non-digital citizenship» but refers to a digital dimension of citizenship and includes the duties and rights that a citizen has in both the offline and the online world.

However, in this digital dimension of citizenship rights, certain issues such as privacy, data sovereignty, accessibility to the digital space have to be defended in a different way than in the offline realm. It is important to note that, in the ECHO Network’s understanding, these rights and responsibilities are not limited by a person’s nationality, but should be enjoyed by all people, regardless of their citizenship status.

With this understanding of citizenship in mind, an ethical digital transition ensures that emerging digital technologies do not perpetuate (or widen) existing inequalities and discrimination, and that a digital environment is created for **the common good**. This includes protecting people’s privacy online and moving away from (digital) surveillance.

These technologies should be developed with people’s needs at the centre, with the aim of promoting social progress and **sustainable development**. A commitment to human rights and democracy is essential for this ethical digital transition. **Digital citizenship education** is key to make the digital transition accessible and inclusive and needs to be accessible to all.

*2 : Council of Europe (2017). *Digital Citizenship Education Working Conference*. Accessible through : <https://rm.coe.int/digital-citizenship-education-working-conference-empowering-digital-ci/1680745545>

3. Plea for an Ethical and Sustainable Digital Transition

A. A Digital Space for the Common Good

We promote the vision of a **socially inclusive digital space for the common good**. This space is characterised by software and technologies created by and for the people, where the people are in control, rather than market strategies or capitalist interests. In this regard, we strive for free software³ as a minimum requirement for all public services.

In this space **knowledge, power and ownership are shared**. We promote digital common goods, free and open-source software and services, and decentralized communications as they lie at the core of an ethical digital space.⁴ This entails a commitment to collaborative management of data and knowledge such as through creative commons licenses.

Digital infrastructures should be designed in such a way that they **contribute to democratic practice** rather than undermine them. This means that actors are held accountable, and users of digital technologies/software have a high degree of agency.

Finally, we strive for people to have the right to be forgotten digitally and to have the choice whether they access public services online or offline, to ensure accessibility for all.

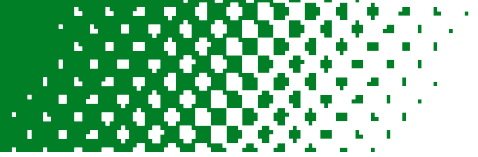
B. The Digital Transition & Digital Education

Education is key to bridging the digital divide and ensuring that the digital transition is inclusive. However, there remains a worrying **lack of basic digital skills** in the EU, as the latest data shows that only 53% of the population in the EU has basic digital skills.⁵ This is concerning as the **EU's Digital Compass & The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan** set the target that already by 2030, at least 80% of the EU population should have basic digital skills, calling it «a precondition for inclusion and participation in the labour market and society in a digitally transformed Europe». Therefore, we plead for **accessible and inclusive digital education**, and access to digital infrastructure and materials.

*3 : i.e. software whose source code can be studied, modified and redistributed under the same license and can therefore no longer be withdrawn from the community

*4 : see e.g. [The Free Software Foundation](#)

*5 : [StatisticsEurostat \(europa.eu\)](#)



Big Tech companies are profiting from the digitalisation of education and infrastructures without public or with little guidance. We must **counter the commodification of education**, which entails the commodification of learners' data, and support an ethical and democratic online space and raise awareness of **alternative digital education tools** other than those produced by private companies, such as open-source tools and creative commons.

Education must remain a public good, and we must ensure that the private sector does not influence our education programmes. It is crucial that our education serves the public good and equips citizens with the knowledge and skills, such as **critical thinking and media literacy**, to engage with and contribute to their communities. **Online education & training** are an essential component of high-quality and inclusive education as it complements face-to-face teaching, enhancing accessibility, and promoting social inclusion.⁶

C. A Sustainable Digital Transition

Our increasingly digital society has an **environmental cost**. Data centres consume vast amounts of energy, and materials and digital equipment production contribute to carbon emissions and resource depletion. The digital industry's carbon footprint grows by an average of 6% a year, already accounting for 3% to 4% of global emissions today.⁷ The environmental impact of digitalisation must be limited.

There is a need to approach the digital transition with a **circulareconomy** approach focusing on **sustainability** rather than endless market growth and cleaning up digital clutter and waste. This entails a society where (digital) goods are built to last, and its people keep the right to «repair, tinker and build».⁸ In this regard, digital and data sobriety is a key concept in lowering one's digital footprint. There is a need to think more locally when it comes to digital infrastructures, which would limit its environmental impact and enhance individual's digital autonomy.

*6 : see e.g. [Council Recommendation of 23 November 2023 on the key enabling factors for successful digital education & training](#).

*7 : [The Shift Project \(2024\)](#)

*8 : EDRi (2024). [EDRi's vision for digital futures for people, democracy and the planet. Reclaiming power from Big Tech and fighting state surveillance](#)

4. Policy Recommendations

A.Digital Space for the Common Good

CSO Involvement

Decision-making at EU level should be made more inclusive, transparent and accountable when it comes to digitalisation and technology policy initiatives.⁹ One way to do this concretely is to include in legal frameworks the **meaningful involvement of civil society** when developing technologies.¹⁰

Privacy and Data Protection

Protecting people's **data privacy** online is pivotal for creating an ethical digital space. In this regard the EU must ensure that the **General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)** is enforced effectively, and that the full potential of the GDPR is fully realised.¹¹ Structural and procedural enforcement issues need to be addressed.

Access to Essential Services

Digitalisation should be inclusive and accessible. It must not be imposed upon or result in the exclusion of certain people, groups or communities. Principle 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights refers to the right to access essential services.¹² However, the EU's leading policy initiative on the digital transformation, **the Digital Decade policy programme** envisions that by 2030, 100% of public services should move online. This raises questions on how certain digitally vulnerable groups will be able to access these essential services, given the relatively low level of basic digital skills among EU citizens at the moment. To ensure the highest degree of inclusion and to avoid deepening the digital divide, EU digitalisation strategies should provide citizens the right to have both online and offline access to essential services.¹³

*9: *Ibid.*

*10: *Ibid.* Read more on the need for a better civic space and civil dialogue [here](#)

*11: EDRi & Access Now. (2024). [GDPR Enforcement Done Right: Position on the EU Proposal for additional procedural rules concerning the General Data Protection Regulation \(GDPR\)](#)

*12: "Everyone has the right to access essential services of good quality, including water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communications. Support for access to such services shall be available for those in need." ([European Pillar of Social Rights, principle 20](#))

*13: [Righttooffline. Open Letter: Essential Services Must be Accessible even offline](#)

2. The Digital Transition & Digital Education

Basic Digital Skills & Transversal Competences

While basic digital skills and transversal competences such as media literacy and critical thinking are less acquired by Europeans, the digital realm is increasingly influencing democratic processes and participation. These skills and competences are vital for learners to be able to ethically and responsibly use digital technologies.¹⁴ Therefore, **Digital Citizenship Education** should be better connected to basic competence development, and in this regard more synergies could be explored between **the Digital Education Action Plan and DigComp**.¹⁵

Privacy and Data Protection for Learners

Though **the 2022 European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles for the Digital Decade** underlines the need to promote and support "efforts to equip all education and training institutions with digital connectivity, infrastructure and tools", there have been concerns about the way in which these tools deal with the data and privacy of learners. Since the pandemic, there has been a rise in the use of EdTech to monetise education.¹⁶ Furthermore, in a letter to the European Commission in November 2023, the Flemish and Dutch education ministers raised concerns about the use of certain Big Tech educational software platforms that do not guarantee **the privacy and data protection** of European learners and schools.¹⁷

To stop education being treated like a commodity, and learners' data being used in this way, educators and education and training institutions need to receive more guidance on **procurement of digital technology** in education and training. There is a lack of quality assurance on available digital education content. Furthermore, there is a need to promote more effectively the fair and sustainable alternatives to the Big Tech, such as Creative Commons or free open-source software.¹⁸ The **mid-term review of the Digital Education Action Plan** provides an opportunity to address these concerns on privacy and data protection, and procurement of digital technology, and enhance coordination with other (national) initiatives, such as Data Protection Impact Assessments (DPIAs), and the GDPR.

*14 : [2023 Council Recommendation on the key enabling factors for successful digital education and training](#)

*15 : Lifelong Learning Platform (2024). [Input Paper: Review of Digital Education Action Plan](#)

*16 : SOLIDAR Foundation. (2020). [Position Paper: AI Implications for Education & Lifelong Learning](#)

*17 : See e.g. [Council of the European Union. \(8 November 2023\). Information Note: Data Privacy in Digital Education](#)

*18 : Lifelong Learning Platform (2024). [Input Paper: Review of Digital Education Action Plan](#)

3. A Sustainable Digital Transition

The European Green Deal

To mitigate the environmental impact of the digital transition, a **comprehensive European Green Deal** is key. We must make **the right to repair** a reality and ensure **the reuse and recyclability** of technological products. Furthermore, it is crucial to prohibit the premature and planned obsolescence of these products.¹⁹

*19 : EDRi (2024). [EDRi's vision for digital futures for people, democracy and the planet. Reclaiming power from Big Tech and fighting state surveillance](#)

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