

## INTRODUCTION

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In a world defined by growing global interconnectedness and technological reliance, the significance of media and information should not be overlooked. We engage with many forms of digital media, such as news stories and videos, which have a significant impact on shaping our views, beliefs, and behaviors. Nevertheless, persons who are on the autism spectrum face unique challenges as well as possibilities when it comes to navigating the complex realm of media. Considering the contemporary context, the **ASDigital Project** (2020-1-PT01-KA226-SCH-094961) and the **a-STEP**<sup>1</sup> COST action (19104) have brought together a group of academics, professionals and people on the autism spectrum to develop short, user-friendly approaches that reflect on the existing evidence about the challenges and promises that emerge from this relationship.

The primary objective of this book titled “**Media Literacy and Assistive Technologies for Empowerment in Autism**” is to examine and shed light on the aforementioned dynamics. It aims to provide valuable perspectives on the ways in which media literacy and assistive technology can enhance the capabilities of individuals with autism, enabling them to flourish in the era of digital advancements.

Promoting more media literacy initiatives including individuals in the autism spectrum could provide them the tools to navigate an ever-evolving digital landscape with confidence and competence (Ressa, 2022). Therefore, in the first part of this book, called “**Autism, Diversity, and Media Literacy**”, six chapters are presented, to explore the different intersections between the fields of media literacy, media education, diversity, and autism.

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1 <https://www.a-step-action.eu/>



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The chapter “**Decoding the Digital Landscape: Media Literacy for Autism Spectrum Disorder**” seeks to outline key directions for research and intervention concerning the relationship between individuals on the autism spectrum and media literacy. It emphasizes the importance of authentic representation, empathic media literacy, neurodiverse talent, and social advocacy in the media, as inclusivity strategies. By proposing the collective approach of the potential challenges, and how this would include researchers, media professionals, advocacy organizations, and a more neuro-diversity-driven media education, the chapter intends to refine the current state of the art and contribute to evidence-based interventions that empower individuals with autism in the realm of media literacy.

In the following chapter, an experienced teacher, working in the field of autism – **Ewa Litwinczuk** – was supported by a more academic perspective to provide the readers with an overview of implementing pedagogical strategies based on TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication-Hazardous Children) and PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System). In a more innovative approach, the authors provide an evidence-based reflection on the potential of these strategies in the promotion of literacy, through their visual supports.

A digital game specifically developed to foster digital security-driven competencies in youth in the autism spectrum is the starting point of the next chapter – “**Desktop Adventure**”: a Tool for the Development of Digital Competencies in Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder – by **Conceição Costa** and **Vera Pradiante**. Here, the authors provide insights on how diversity was included in the game design and development process, while presenting the game’s intervention proposal and expected outcomes.

In the following chapter, **Sara Rye** continues to explore the broad potential of gaming as a pedagogical tool, this time as a path to foster a more equitable higher education system. According to the author, a variety of analogue games promotes cooperative learning, facilitating the development of communication skills, group problem-solving abilities, and conceptual understanding through collaborative effort. Furthermore, these games foster a sense of community, enhancing the educational environment in educational settings through the provision of multimodal engagement, collaborative opportunities, critical thinking exercises, and experiential learning activities that enhance traditional instructional approaches.

In the next chapter, **Didi** takes on the challenge of thinking about the potential of a media franchise in their identity construction as an autistic and non-binary person. “**Bringing Hues to the Spectrum: A Journey with Autism, Gender Identity, and Pokémon**” is an in-depth description of a personal journey, which can support more and less academic reflections on diagnosis, human relationships, development, gender identity and the mediating role of fantasy worlds. As it was originally written in Portuguese, this chapter is published in both languages (Portuguese and English).

By way of conclusion, in the last chapter of this part, **Ana F. Oliveira** issues challenges the readers – can media education be, instead of a barrier, a bridge to connect generations? In “**Minding the Gap: Building Bridges through Intergenerational Media and Information**”, the author transcends the neurotypical - neurodiverse debate, bringing us the issue of generationality in media education, as a new source of opportunities, guided by a set of possibilities to be explored, which include: access; knowledge; competencies; connections; interests and motivations.

Through these chapters, we embark on a journey that includes developing digital competencies, examining identity within media franchises, interpreting the digital landscape, and implementing innovative pedagogies. By doing this, this first part intends to advance knowledge while also sparking a coordinated effort between academics, media professionals, advocacy groups, and educational institutions that genuinely reflect neurodiversity. In the end, this compilation aims to improve the current state of the art by fostering evidence-based methods that empower people

on the autism spectrum in the area of media literacy.

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### **References**

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