Social media harnessed in new age awareness campaign

Awareness of age-related illnesses and research is set to get a boost thanks to a new EU project - A Sharing Approach to Promoting Science (ASAPS) - aimed at raising public awareness on health-related scientific research focusing on ageing. The ASAPS project has been awarded EUR 1 million in funding by the European Commission under its Seventh Framework Programme (FP7). As it currently stands, by 2050 the number of people in the EU aged 65 and above is expected to have grown by 70% and the number of people aged over 80 by 170%. As a result of these figures, ageing will be a major social and economic challenge for European societies in the 21st century and the EU is at the forefront of meeting these challenges.

Despite all the funding and EU policies targeting age-related issues, the general public is, in many cases, unaware of the research that is being done in this area and the major breakthroughs. Programmes like ASAPS aim to fill this awareness gap through the use of film, social media and smartphone apps - all of which will highlight current research into cognitive ageing and dementia.

The campaign will be coordinated by Dr Sabina Brennan of Trinity College Dublin's (TCD) Institute of Neuroscience in Dublin, Ireland. A research psychologist, Dr Brennan is the scientific research development manager at NEIL, the Neuro-Enhancement for Independent Lives programme that is run at TCD.

According to Dr Brennan, digital media will play an important role in the upcoming campaign. "We want to share important and relevant scientific information about ageing in an interactive way that will encourage individuals to log on, click and share," she said.

This move to include digital media such as apps and social media is a recognition that communication is becoming more interactive. The researchers believe that creating an effective public information campaign requires a fusion of creativity, strategic thinking, knowledge of emerging technology and interactive platforms, understanding of user behaviours and best practice communications expertise.

In addition to producing mobile smartphone and tablet applications, over the course of 2 years the project will also deliver a multilingual package of films including online short films, a 60-minute documentary suitable for TV broadcast, a sustainable digital platform, an interactive website, and a pack (DVDs, leaflets, posters) for the general public and other key stakeholders.

It is worth noting the costs associated with ageing. According to the project, age-related cognitive decline is associated with increased risk of dementia and higher healthcare costs. In Ireland, the current cost of dementia healthcare services is estimated to be EUR 1.69 billion, while in Europe the cost is estimated to be EUR 160 billion.

"Cognitive ageing is a global challenge that has real relevance for everyone. European citizens deserve to be
aware of and benefit from the research that is being conducted on their behalf,’ Dr Brennan added.

To support this, the first media campaign from ASAPS will be Sharing Age. This initiative will share important information on how to stay mentally sharp and remain independent as we get older. The project wants to make sure that they only share information that is relevant and as a result they are asking the public to share their thoughts with them through an online questionnaire and to tell them about their likes and dislikes, lifestyle, and hopes and fears about growing old.

The consortium will include Irish communications agency Red Dog, media production company 360 Production, digital creative agency Big Motive and AGE Platform Europe. The latter is a European network of around 165 organisations for people who are over 50 years of age, representing directly over 30 million older people in Europe.

Meanwhile, a group of researchers from the 14 Irish Institutes of Technology visited Brussels recently on 13 and 14 November to learn more about EU funding possibilities for Irish researchers. During the two-day visit they met with the European Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, as well as with Mr Wolfgang Burtscher, Deputy Director-General of the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (DG RTD). During the visit, the group was briefed on the various funding mechanisms available to researchers, including those under FP7 and the future Horizon 2020 - the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation which will run from 2014 to 2020.

The researchers also visited the European Parliament (EP) where they met with Irish Members of European Parliament Liam Aylward, Emer Costello, Marian Harkin, Sean Kelly, Phil Prendergast and Gay Mitchell, and received an overview of how the EP works generally and, more specifically, how it is involved in the currently ongoing decision-making process with regard to the proposed budget of EUR 80 billion for Horizon 2020. For more information, please visit: ASAPS: http://www.asaps-sharingage.eu/AGE Platform Europe: http://www.age-platform.eu

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