

Internet delivers mixed messages for older people

by Geoff Ellis

How will the internet impact on older people's ability to maintain social networks in coming decades? A **new report** argues there will always be a generational divide in capabilities and preferences about information and communication technology (ICT), and this could materially and socially disadvantage some older people.

Jacqueline Damant and Martin Knapp of the Personal Social Services Research Unit at LSE looked at the likely changes in society and technology which could affect the ability of older people to maintain social networks of support. Their study is part of the **Government Office for Science's Foresight project on the Future of an Ageing Population**.

The report finds that ICT has the potential both to help and to harm social networking. It can help alleviate feelings of loneliness by bridging geographical distance from family members and friends, but it could also lead to the breakdown of traditional forms of social interaction.

While internet connectivity plays a central role in the daily lives of young people, older people commonly express ambivalence about ICT and tend to use it more peripherally. But if they do not take advantage of ICT, they could be doubly penalised. Not only would they miss out on convenience of lower-cost e-commerce, but older people could also lose important opportunities for social engagement.

Meeting acquaintances in the supermarket, high street or bank queue; sitting in the GP waiting room; being visited at home by the community nurse; spending an afternoon at the bingo or the bridge club; or just popping round to a neighbour for a cup of tea and a chat. Today's ICT could easily replace every one of those activities in the future.

It is estimated that some 4.8 million people aged over 64 do not have internet skills and the report identifies a series of barriers that obstruct their taking up ICT. Many older people regard ICT as a luxury, rather than a tool for improving the quality of life and many have poor access to good broadband service. Relatively higher numbers of older people live in rural areas, where internet speeds are often slow. Other barriers to having ICT services include perceived threats to privacy, and of fraud and identity theft, and anxiety about ongoing costs and exploitation.

The authors argue that public action may be needed to ensure that ICT access is not denied to some older people because of cost, or because of physical, sensory or cognitive decline. Action is also desirable to identify how older people can use ICT to maintain and expand their social networks. And to respond to the plight of older people who find themselves increasingly isolated and even excluded due to the pervasive growth of the internet. Care settings, in particular, should pay more attention to the ICT preferences of the people they support. At present, only about 25% of care homes in the UK provide Wi-Fi.

ICT content is disproportionately aimed at younger people; few offerings have been developed to meet the needs of older people with, for example, physical or visual impairment. The population of older people is highly heterogeneous and little research has been done on how different groups use the internet. Unsurprisingly, for older adults, specifically, there is a strong association between income and access to ICT.

There is an expectation that incorporating ICT into the delivery of health and care could help to deliver services and provide reassurance to family members. But there is little robust evidence to suggest such telehealth and telecare initiatives will bring tangible benefits. Nevertheless, **↑** ICT-

based health and care services can be streamlined and personalised, then they could conceivably make important contributions.

Overall, the impact of ICT on older people is mixed. Older people are certainly capable of learning to use ICT; some users gain a sense of accomplishment and improved self-esteem. Some studies show little or no improvement in, for example, measures of wellbeing, while other ICT users appear to experience positive impacts on their level of participation in volunteer, social, religious, political, and community groups and clubs. Yet other studies show that loneliness for older adults is positively correlated with the amount of time spent on the internet.

As the report tellingly observes, 25 years ago people were getting excited about fax machines and the World Wide Web did not exist. Speculating on how the current plethora of devices and software offerings via email, the web and social media could evolve – let alone the “cloud computing” or the “Internet of Things” – is not easy.

The authors express confidence that older adults will make greater use of ICT over the coming years, and especially for performing everyday tasks, such as shopping, banking, playing games and in personal care functions, or in maintaining or expanding social networks. But devices and services will need to be designed to be accessible to older people.

For this to happen, new technologies will need to be responsive to the needs, capabilities, resources and preferences of older adults. Age-related deterioration in physical, sensory and cognitive abilities will need to be taken into account. Opportunities for learning new skills – beyond those acquired during the years of paid employment and adapted to personal capabilities – will need to be developed.

Older people with long-term conditions have fewer opportunities to engage with mainstream ICT, and are at greater risk of exclusion from the digital society. Yet ICT may present a real opportunity to reduce social exclusion and to improve self-management of chronic conditions and improve older people's quality of life.

Further information

Damant J, Knapp M (2015) [What are the likely changes in society and technology which will impact upon the ability of older adults to maintain social \(extra-familial\) networks of support now, in 2025 and in 2040?](#), Government Office for Science, London.

This evidence review is part of the Government Office for Science's Foresight project on the Future of an Ageing Population.

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August 12th, 2015 | [Social Care](#) | [1 Comment](#)
