

# The Internet is an Ageist Environment: A Study of the "grey digital divide"

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Technology today is advancing at a heretofore unseen rate. Not that long ago, the very idea of owning one's own computer was incomprehensible for all but the very rich. Now, computers and their associated technological innovations have become much more accessible to the vast majority of citizens of first-world countries. However, there still exist many types of digital divide, separating the "haves" from the "have-nots". These include groups marginalized by many socio-economic factors. Among the more prevalent are educational background and, surprisingly, age. In the current age of technological advancement, seniors are getting left behind. Those who could, potentially, benefit most from some of the services available through the internet are precisely those who are least likely and able to access them. This review looks at some of the major themes surrounding the "grey digital divide", and considers some of the possible methods to bridge this gap.

Within the literature reviewed, there are six major themes that are apparent. Firstly, most authors define a precise age range for their use of the term "senior" or "elderly", and the concepts of "young elderly" and "old elderly". Secondly, a comparison is made between the older citizens and other age groups, or the population as a whole, to give a clearer idea of the size of the digital divide. Thirdly, other socio-economic factors that play a part in the decision of seniors to pursue computer and internet use are discussed. Fourthly, seniors' reasons for using or not using computers and the internet are addressed through various studies in many countries. Fifthly, some barriers to computer and internet use for seniors are listed, and possible

solutions offered. Finally, some of the many benefits related to computer use are explained, both from the perspectives of the researchers and of the seniors themselves.

### Young Elderly and Old Elderly: Defining the Terms

The terms used by most of the researchers are senior, senior adult, or elderly. Nevertheless, they all make a point of defining exactly what is meant by these terms within the context of their studies, as the differences are quite astounding. In Morris, the larger study conducted had people as young as 50 participating, and the smaller had people as young as 55 (45-46). The survey conducted in Slovenia mirrors this age, as its youngest participant was 51 (Juznic, 338). Other articles, which had at their base a more general survey of the contemporary situation, made use of statistics from the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom, and so were confined to the age differentiations that these offered. Generally, all the articles used similar breakdowns within their "seniors", to separate those who were likely still part of the work force when computers and internet became common, or the "young elderly", from those who had already retired. Most researchers found that this division still left a large age range that needed further stratification. The study by Brabazon separates the over 60 age range into 3 parts: 60-64, 65-74, and 75 and over (np). Among those who included under 60's in their research, this division was also common, the exception being Paul, whose studied group of 65+ remained whole (np).

### Younger Users: Prevalence of Internet Use across populations

Every study made it very clear that the issues relating to lack of computer and internet use is one that is particular to this age group. Statistics from 2004 in the European Union show that while up to 75% of younger people, in the 16-24 age range, use the internet, only 25% of those in the 55-74 age range do so. In the United Kingdom, the difference is even more pronounced, as 67%, or two-thirds of people aged 45-54 are internet users, while only one in nine people aged 65-74 are (Morris,

44). Slovenia, one of the most connected countries in the European Union, sees those percentages drop from a high of 82.8% of teenagers using the internet, to a paltry 4.8% of 66-74 year olds (Juznic, 334). Statistics from a German study show that even though “elderly people ... are the fastest growing Internet user group”, only 20% of them are internet users, whereas 74% of the 18-29-year-olds are connected to the internet (Paul, np). This breakdown is almost identical to the one mentioned by Brabazon for Americans (np).

### Socio-economics of seniors' internet usage

There are other socio-economic factors at play influencing the use of computers and the internet by seniors. These factors are the same ones that affect the entire population's use of the internet. The most widely mentioned one is educational background and training. Most of the research studies cite the fact that the “young elderly” were in the workforce when computers and the internet were introduced as a major factor contributing to their continued use of new technologies. Within the rest of the sample population, those “with higher education are more likely to embrace the internet” (Juznic, 341). In the Slovenian study, the sampled respondents were all participating in Third Age University programmes, and were three times more likely to use the internet than their less educated counterparts (Juznic, 342). In the case of the studies conducted in non-Anglophone countries, namely Germany and Slovenia, it was mentioned that language learning plays an important role in internet usage. Most seniors were educated before it became practice in Europe to require learning two or more languages while in school, and so have difficulty navigating a world that is predominantly English-speaking (Paul, np).

Gender was also seen to be a major factor influencing the seniors' willingness to learn about new technology. For the most part, men were far more willing to adopt these technologies than women. In Slovenia, 80% of men studied use the internet, compared to only 27% of women (Juznic, 340). This is more significant for the elderly

population, as women outnumber men in this age category across all countries studied.

### Stated Reasons for use or lack thereof

Seniors state many reasons for their use, or more often non-use, of computers and the internet. One of the biggest motivators for seniors to become familiar with the internet is the ability to keep in touch. Email is a big inducement for the participants of Brabazon's study in Australia. The vast majority of them have ties to other countries, either because they were born overseas, or one or both of their parents were, which forms a "connective tissue linking lives of older Western Australians with the rest of the world" (np). Another motivator is the search for information. Seniors look for news and for specific information about travel, their hobbies, or product information when they are online (Paul, np). Gust, in her article, recommends a light-hearted approach to teaching seniors and other adult learners about the information available on the web. She uses the context of the movie "Breakfast at Tiffany's" to highlight not only the differences between old-fashioned card catalogues and the new public access catalogues, but also pulls from the movie to find examples of the kinds of information that can be found online (564). Durodoye included a list of websites that were found to be useful in her article. These senior-oriented sites range from health information to social networking opportunities to information for national seniors advocacy groups (367).

For some seniors, the possibilities that open up for those willing to surf the web are not compelling. They are simply "not interested". However, Millward reports that, based on some of the comments made by participants in his study in Wigan (UK), there could be a "'fear' of new technology" hiding within this position. In this case, participants reported that they considered themselves to be "too old for that sort of thing". Millward also suggests that the response of "not interested" may actually be the means that seniors use to maintain their pride. They would rather say that they have no interest than admit to a lack of knowledge or skills necessary for internet use (np). Paul suggests that the high proportion of women in the senior age group could

be affecting this, as women from the current senior generation “were traditionally raised to demonstrate little interest in technology” (np).

### Barriers to seniors’ access and use of internet and computers

There are many barriers to seniors’ use of computers and the internet. One of the most prevalent assumptions is that providing access to the internet is the biggest barrier. This does not seem to be the case, as, though many respondents to the various studies were actually within easy distance of free internet while responding, most of them still do not access the internet at all. In fact, the study that Morris conducted in Derbyshire was done at public libraries, all of which have internet access readily available, and a quarter of respondents still said there was a lack of access (50). This shows that there are other factors that are “at least as vital as the issue of access” (Millward, np). Actual physical limitations can be insurmountable obstacles to internet use. “Product developers do not care very much about the fact that the elderly cannot use tiny mobile telephones very well or that they are unable to decipher icons. A large number of elderly cannot read text on the screen or use a keyboard due to visual impairments or other physical or psychological handicaps” (Paul, np).

Seniors’ attitudes towards computers and the internet can also be a barrier. As mentioned above, many seniors who claim to be “not interested” in learning about computers are masking other fears: of new technology, of being seen as “too old” to learn about new technology, or of appearing unintelligent when faced with this new learning challenge. The general impression with seniors that computers and the internet are for young people, that this technology is meant for the generation that their grandchildren belong to, is prevalent (Juznic, 342).

### Benefits of computer and internet use

Though they may be reticent to learn new skills related to computers and the internet, those seniors who do reap many benefits, both in terms of social interactions and skill development. As stated above, the primary use of the internet by seniors is for email.

This allows them to stay connected with family and friends who live far away. The information available on the internet is also helpful for seniors trying to stay connected, as they may find communities with similar interests developing online. Also, "there are... positive psychological effects of internet usage" in that it stimulates intellectual pursuits and can be seen as a challenge. Seniors who are open to learning new things stay more independent (Juznic, 335). They can also experience a sense of empowerment from being able to acquire new skills (Millward, np)

Those seniors for whom technology will never be part of their everyday lives may still find ways to benefit from the advances to this technology. In one example, telephone intermediaries placed online orders for groceries to be delivered to seniors who were not able to go to the store themselves. Volunteers in this program offered both a technological aspect, where they used their internet skills to place grocery orders for the clients, and a social aspect, where during the phone calls to place orders, they also talked to the clients about matters unrelated to the grocery order, and in some cases gave advice and encouragement to the seniors (Blythe, 40-41)

One way to combine both the social interactions and skill development is through taking courses in computer or internet or information literacy. One example that not only does this but also bridges a generation gap is delved into by Kolodinsky. Teens Teaching Internet Skills, or TTIS, is a "national, intergenerational partnership sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture 4-H Youth technology Leadership Team and the Health Care Financing Administration". It pairs groups of teens with senior citizens who are looking to gain skills in using computers. During the course of the program, seniors learn new skills, interact with the younger generation, and allow the teens to practice skills that will benefit them later in life (np).

### Conclusion

The grey digital divide is prevalent today, but it may not always be so. As the population ages, "there is a strong likelihood that the 'grey' digital divide will naturally be bridged, as future generations of seniors get used to using computers and the

Internet during their everyday working lives" (Morris, 56). However, this is most likely to happen only as the current population ages. As Brabazon notes, "the 'problem' of non-wired seniors will die with them" (np). However, that does not give current society permission to simply wait for that to happen.

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