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## Older people and online social interactions

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How to cite:

Minocha, Shailey (2013). Older people and online social interactions. In: Older people and technological inclusion: multidisciplinary, perspectives on contemporary realities and aspirations, ESRC Seminar Series on Technology and Ageing, 22 Apr 2013, Milton Keynes.

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://www.technologyandageing.info/the-esrc-seminar-series.html>

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## Older people and online social interactions

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## The context



- 1985: over 65s were 15% of UK's population
- 2010: 17%
- 2035: 23%
- shrinking workforce will need to support a growing population of older people
- technological solutions for their care are being sought so as to improve the services and save costs
- monitoring devices, assistive technologies

## Effects of more independent living



- **Warning by** Prof Noel Sharkey, an expert in the field of robotics at the University of Sheffield:  
...a future where cutting corners and costs leads to the elderly becoming little more than **prisoners in their own homes**, **socially isolated** and **tended to largely by machines**.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/active/9983886/Can-technology-fill-the-elderly-care-gap.html>

## About the project



- focus on older people (aged 65+)
- however, we are not investigating telecare and telehealth solutions but...
- their **online social interactions**
- email, discussions forums, Skype, Twitter, blogs, Facebook
- Tablets (e.g. iPads), smart phones, desktops, laptops

## Context of our project



- digital by default
- social inclusion via digital inclusion?
- being online and social connectedness
  - keeping in contact
  - overcoming isolation
  - something to talk about
  - bridges generations
  - enhance or even sustain quality of life and well-being

## What are we investigating?



- **motivations** for participating in online social interactions
- **advantages** they experience
- **risks** that they perceive
- **obstacles** that they experience
- **disadvantages** that they experience

## What are we hoping to achieve?



- recommendations for
  - supporting older people who are already online
  - how to get older people online
- raising the awareness amongst support networks
  - formal (IT trainers)
  - informal (family, friends, neighbours)

## What are we hoping to achieve?



- sensitising designers of websites and online services
- highlighting the need for specialised customer service for older people
- how we should involve older people in the design of products and services?
- how we should be exploiting the skills and experiences of older people?

## Who are our participants?



- older people (aged 65+) who are online
- informal support network: family, friends, neighbours
- formal network: IT trainers
- academics: research in ageing
- representatives of Age UK, Carers MK, U3A MK
- marketing consultant: 'an ageing consumer'

## How have we recruited our participants?



- email lists within the university and outside
- through Age UK, U3A MK, Carers MK
- colleagues who have been keen to help
- communities where we live
- recruitment through **intermediaries**

## How are we collecting the data?



- stories via email
- face-to-face/Skype/phone one to one interviews
- group interviews
- workshops Age UK, U3A MK, Carers MK
- events that bring bring people of different skills and backgrounds together but who are interested in this area

## Reflections: one-to-one interviews and events



- rich experience and skills set amongst the older users
- like to meet up face-to-face and learn from one another
- are willing to help and participate in research
- like interactivity in data collection
- become 'co-researchers'
- empathy, patience, concern, follow-up

## Reflections: getting people online



- 'holistic view'
  - their backgrounds
  - what they do now?
  - technology
  - training
  - people around them (support networks)
  - local community
  - costs involved: can they afford?

## Report of our preliminary findings



- **trigger**: finding information, peer pressure, family moving afar
- **motivations**: social connectedness, keep in touch
- **advantages**: have a voice, overcome social isolation
- **obstacles**: finding on-going technical support, other skills that are also required: concept of files, folders,...



## Some more of our findings



- **risks**: privacy, fear of being spammed, not sure of the quality of online information, not being able to trust somebody whom you haven't met in the real world
- **disadvantages**: fear that it would take over their lives, go out less, socialise less in the real world, effects on mobility and isolation

## Some recommendations



- not training them in the way that we would like to train them but
  - adapting the training to their backgrounds, needs, interests
- one-off training is not sufficient
- training in pairs by family members is helpful
- using repetitive strategies
- asking them to maintain a notebook

## Some more recommendations



- ongoing technical support
  - home care workers; neighbourhood 'technical support' networks; peer support networks; walk-in centres in the town
- explaining the role of a software application in their context and as per their needs
- making visible the features of accessibility
- privacy in software applications should be set to maximum by default

## Our concerns



- time constraints (project ends in July 2013)
- effectiveness of our materials
- take-up of our recommendations
- building a local **community of practice**: e.g. OU Human Resources, U3A, Milton Keynes, Age UK, Milton Keynes, Carers Milton Keynes, Carers Bucks
- online platform(s) for peer support and discussion

## Publications, resources and dialogue



- Conducting empirical research with older people. In: *Designing for- and with - vulnerable people*, 27 April 2013, Paris, France (forthcoming) <http://oro.open.ac.uk/36592/>

Older people and online social interactions: an empirical investigation. In: *The UKAIS International Conference on Information Systems (UKAIS)*, 18-20 March 2013, Worcester College, University of Oxford. <http://oro.open.ac.uk/36591/>

- Website of **bookmarks**: <https://delicious.com/seniors>
- Project **email box**: [olderpeople-beingonline@open.ac.uk](mailto:olderpeople-beingonline@open.ac.uk)

## Acknowledgments



- Project team
- Age UK, Milton Keynes
- Carers MK
- Cordia
- JISC TechDis
- U3A Milton Keynes