

Older people, computers, and ethnicity - an academic research backwater?

Lawrence Normie, M.Sc. CPhys MinstP
GeronTech - The Israeli Center for Assistive Technology & Aging
P.O.B 3489, Jerusalem 91034, Israel
e-mail: LNormie@jdc.org.il

L. Normie. Older people, computers, and ethnicity – An academic research backwater? Gerontechnology 2003; 2(4):285-288 The 'digital divide' often is discussed in terms of cultural differences between older and younger people. Even when, in the literature, racial ethnicity is addressed as a possible factor in computer and Internet use, little attempt is made to correlate this with the behaviour of specific age groups, except those of school age. The apparent working assumption adopted by many consumer studies is that ethnic diversity in the general population is a marginal or diminishing factor in the popular take-up of information technology. This editorial suggests that the above assumption, if possibly correct for children and young adults, may be unreasonable when considering the needs, attitudes, and in particular literacy skills, of older adults with ethnic background. Additional research is proposed into the parametric relationship between age and ethnicity, as it affects computer use.

Keywords: older people, ethnicity, computers, Internet, digital divide

Ethnicity as a factor in the take-up of computers and the Internet by older people has been proposed as a worthwhile research question¹ in a relatively unexplored area. To be sure, cultural influences on older people's use of personal computers and, in particular, the Internet, are discussed in the literature². However, cultural factors there are associated usually with the generation gap, but rarely address ethnicity per se. Other than perhaps a perfunctory nod at ethnographic issues³⁻⁵, few quantitative findings have been published in this respect.

Concerning ethnicity as a possible factor in older people's interaction with information technology (IT), Glanz in 1997⁶ noted: "a common error in discussing the aged is the assumption of a mythic homogeneity". This attitude does not appear to have changed in particular, as is borne out by recent surveys of older users of the Internet, which give scant attention to age

and ethnicity treated as covariables^{5,7-8}. An exception (the only one known to the author) is data compiled by Pew Internet & American Life Project Surveys⁹, whose monthly and annual tracking data sets provide statistical estimates of Internet use by different age groups (including 65+) among American Whites, Blacks, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and mixed race. However, similar information for multi-cultural Europe is utterly lacking.

In addressing the 'digital divide', the target group objectives under Domain 3 (social Inclusion) of the BEEP (Best e-European Practice) project¹⁰ include improvement of computer and Internet literacy among elderly people and facilitation of social inclusion of ethnic minorities and 'non-nationals'. These separately stated objectives seem to reinforce the assumption, also expressed by others¹¹, that older people and ethnic minorities are two exclusive groups that



Figure 1: Participants in Eshel's 'Computers for all Ages' programme. Reproduced with permission of Eshel (2003)

are both digitally disadvantaged, but in their own individual contexts.

The commercial market research literature mirrors this attitude. In an industry report on US domestic Internet use¹² a clear segmentation of the main ethnic groups is given, but though specific age demographic data is included, the ethnic component of each age group is ignored. Indeed, consumer market surveys routinely segment their samples by age, ethnicity, gender, income bracket, etc., but stop short of drawing cross-correlations between age and ethnic origin, though market analysis by age and gender, for example, is common practice. However, common reason suggests that in the case of the Internet, cultural homogeneity is most likely to be found amongst younger users and considerably less amongst those who grew up before the IT revolution⁴.

If one carefully observes what has emerged on the World Wide Web, the existence of prominent multicultural web sites aimed at senior users indicates the importance of treating ageing and ethnicity as conjoint factors where the Internet is concerned. For example the U3A Online project¹³, a joint Australian-New Zealand initiative, provides an information portal where 'Universities of

the Third Age' can share ideas, resources, and information¹⁴. Another instance is the Ageing and Ethnicity Web¹⁵, which offers a highly rich content information service to older people of ethnic minorities around the world.

What practical suggestions can be made to ameliorate the research data deficit with respect to correlation of age, ethnicity, and computer use? One approach is to derive from demographic data inferences concerning the potential scope for the successful introduction of computers and the Internet to a particular ethnic group of seniors.

A candidate variable, included in many demographic surveys, is level of literacy (after all much of the content on the web remains textual and interaction with computers involves at least basic reading skills⁴). Taking for example current data on literacy amongst Israel's older population¹⁶, 16.7 percent of citizens of age 65+ are illiterate in any language. Of this percentage, 24.6 percent are immigrants from Asia or Africa. Amongst the Israeli Arab community, 83.6 percent of those of 65+ cannot read. The highest literacy rates are observed for immigrants from the former Soviet Union, with less than 6.5 percent unable to read.

Implications for introducing computers to older citizens in Israel -through for example the 'Computers for all Ages' national project¹⁷- then would seem rather clear. With respect to older Ashkenazim and non-Arab Christians, the prospects for participation are good, reasonable for Oriental Jews, but marginal for elderly Arabs. Nevertheless, an anecdotal observation is that participation by oriental Jews is by far the most prevalent in senior citizen computer clubs¹⁸. This perhaps is a salutary reminder of the caution that is required when drawing inferences from the secondary data.

In any event, the ethnographic picture in respect of older people and their relationship to computers and the Internet is likely to be considerably more complex than a plain inspection of the demographic data might suggest. This presents an interesting challenge in a virtually unexplored back-water of academic research.

References

1. Doody M, Aizlewood A. Seeking Community on the Internet: Ethnocultural Use of Information Communication Technology. In Herkert JR, editors, Proceedings of 2002 International Symposium on Technology and Society (ISTAS'02) June 6 - 8: Social Implications of Information and Communication Technology. Raleigh: IEEE; 2002. pp 5-13
2. Windrum P, Birchenhall C. Technological diffusion, welfare and growth: technological succession in the presence of network externalities; Report 2002-028. Maastricht: Maastricht Economic Research Institute on Innovation and Technology 2002; pp 8-9
3. Jason BE, Kogan S, Rowan J. In Konstan JA, editor. SIGCHI Bulletin 1999; 31(4): 39-40; www.acm.org/sigchi/bulletin/1999.4a/ellis.pdf, accessed on November 19, 2003
4. Ito M, Adler A, Linde C, Mynatt E, O'Day V. Broadening Access: Research for Diverse Network Communities 1999; SeniorNet 2001; www.seniornet.org/php/default.php?PageID=5495, accessed on November 19, 2003
5. Kubitschke L, Stroetmann V, Stroetmann KA, Duff P. Older People and Information Society Technology - A Global Analysis; Deliverable N° 5.2; European SeniorWatch Observatory and Inventory - A market study about the specific IST needs of older and disabled people to guide industry, RTD and policy; www.seniorwatch.de; Empirica, 11th July 2002; pp 47-48
6. Glanz D. Seniors and Cyberspace: Some Critical Reflections on Computers and Older Persons. Education and Ageing 1997; 12(1/2):69-81
7. IT, Internet and older people. Study conducted by ICM for Age Concern, July 2002; www.ageconcern.org.uk/AgeConcernmedia/Quant_exec_report_ext.pdf, accessed on Nov 17, 2003
8. Silver C. Internet use among older Canadians; Connectedness Series, Statistics Canada, 2001 www.statcan.ca/english/research56F0004MIE/56F0004MIE2001004.pdf, accessed on November 20, 2003
9. www.pewinternet.org/datasets
10. www.beep-eu.org/Content/Domains/Domain%203.htm, accessed on November 20, 2003
11. Hacker K. Digital Divide Facts and Fictions; May 5 2002; from 'Digital Communication and Digital Democracy' www.khacker2.freeyellow.com, accessed on December 9, 2003
12. Pastore, M. Digital Divide More Economic than Ethnic; CyberAtlas; June 15 2000; www.cyberatlas.internet.com/big_picture/demographics/article/0,1323,5901_395581,00., accessed on November 18, 2003
13. www.u3aonline.org.au
14. Dale, L. U3A Online: Enriching the lives of older members of a multicultural society. Paper presented at Ageing Well: The Multicultural Challenge International Symposium 9-10 October 2003, Melbourne, Australia. Pre-publication draft for symposium proceedings to be published shortly by Alma Unit for Research on Ageing (AURA) and Inner Western Region Migrant Resource Centre (IWRMRC) Melbourne, Australia; www4.gu.edu.au/ext/u3a/papers2003_Swindell_Dale_conference.PDF, accessed on November 20, 2003
15. www.aeweb.org
16. Brodsky J, Shnoor Y, Be'er S, editors. The Elderly in Israel: Statistical Abstract 2002. Eshel: Brookdale Institute 2003; pp 142-143 (in Hebrew).

17. Normie L. Israel's elderly population: a general survey of health, independence, and technology; *Gerontechnology* 2002; 1(3):190-197

18. Remark made to the author on November 18, 2003 by the National Director of the Eshel 'Computers for all Ages' project
