

### Digital needs of unpaid carers of older people: A research agenda

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**Purpose** To set out a research agenda for identifying the digital needs of unpaid carers of older people. **Method** In a literature review, we identify unpaid carers' use of ICT, for what purpose, the effect ICT-use has on carers and the people they care for, and the factors that enable or prevent carers from using ICT. Study methodologies were noted. **Results & Discussion** Unpaid (or family) carers make a significant contribution to the overall care of older people. In the US, over 40 million people provide unpaid care for an adult (Catalyst, 2016). In the UK, there are roughly 8.8 million carers, 2 million of whom are aged over 64 years. Almost half of unpaid carers provide more than 90 hours of care per week, often for older people who have complex needs (Carers UK, 2018). As a result of the pressures of caring, many carers experience financial hardship and have care needs of their own (Vitaliano, Zhang & Scanlan, 2003). Like many other aspects of modern life, caring for an older person can be facilitated by digital technologies. Reviews identified a range of ICT devices and applications for carers of older people with dementia (Lorenz, Freddolino, Comas-Herrera, Knapp & Damant, 2017) and other complex needs (Doughty, 2016). The most common ICTs are those with medication management, memory, safety and care delivery functions. Carers UK report that 4 in 5 carers use a form of "technology" to support their care. Most prominently, carers use the internet as source of information (88%) and for communication or online support (44%) (Carers UK, 2018). Reviews by Lucero et al. (2019) and Carretero, Stewart and Centeno (2015) found that some services helped carers manage their caring and paid employment activities, reduced social isolation and stress, improved their physical and mental health, ameliorated interaction with care professionals and enhanced decision-making skills. Despite widespread use, the effect ICT-use has on carers and the people they care for is not well understood; nor are the factors that help or hinder carers' adoption of ICT. The Princess Trust (Princess Trust For Carers, 2012) showed that some carers found the devices and services inaccessible, that they lacked time to use them, and were fearful ICT could exacerbate their loneliness and social isolation. Other barriers noted include cost, lack of awareness and poor understanding of the usefulness of technology to caring (Catalyst, 2016). **Discussion** These findings point to gaps and contradictions in the evidence. This is partially attributable to the small scale of studies, the broad definitions of what ICT consists of, and the rapid rate at which new ICT are developed and then infiltrate mainstream society. In order to protect the essential resource of unpaid family care, research is needed to address the barriers that carers face in using ICT and the mechanisms that support successful ICT adoption. Particular attention must be paid to differences in utilization and effectiveness by factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, race, and ethnicity, requiring larger and more diverse samples than in earlier work. Such research results will support the engagement of older people in proactive co-production of services they need, understand and want to use.

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