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Elderly American and the Internet: E-mail, TV News, and Entertainment Websites

By Michael L. Hilt and Jeremy H. Lipschultz

Abstract: Older Americans, like other groups, vary in their use of the Internet. The participants for this study—elderly computer users from a Midwestern mid-size sample—used e-mail and considered it the most important Internet function. It was common for them to use e-mail with family and friends on a regular, if not daily, basis. When this group of older people did surf the Web, they were more likely to seek information about their special interests rather than visiting mass media sites. They were most likely to use Google.com or Yahoo.com to find sites dealing with weather, health, games, jokes, and entertainment. Additionally, some were interested in online shopping and auctions. The results of this exploratory study suggest the need for radio and television stations' websites to serve as a portal through which elderly users may access information they want and need.

The influence of online media technology on older people may be increasingly important (Barnes, 2001; Burnett & Marshall, 2003). Communication among members of American families is changing as people share information through the Internet (Barnes, 2003; Surratt, 2001). One recent study of elderly individuals in a long-term care facility found initial high interest in the Internet followed by a dramatic decline of usage for a variety of reasons (Namazi & McClintic, 2003).

Historically, older people have been considered high media users. Older adults spend far more time watching television than reading newspapers, and they watch more television than any other age group (Media Literacy, 2003). Of all mass media, television news appears to have the highest credibility (Folkerts & Lacy, 2001). Older viewers are major consumers of television news, preferring news to other programming (Scales, 1996). Goodman (1990) found that older men and women favored television for national news and information and newspapers for local news. At the same time, the elderly are increasingly among the most enthusiastic consumers of online information (Cole, 2003). The Cole study also suggested that higher percentages of elderly people than teens use the Internet. Ferguson and Perse (2000) suggest that the Web is becoming a functional alternative to television for many. Hindman (2000) found that Internet adoption is affected, not only by rural-urban divides, but also by education, income and age.

Communication and Gerontology: Aging in America

Mass media research, as it relates to the established fields of communication and gerontology, provides a conceptual framework. The older population in the United States is increasing dramatically because Americans are living longer (Barrow, 1996). Census projections show that by the year 2040, the nation is

likely to have more people over age 65 than under age 21, and more than one in four Americans will be 65 or older (Usdansky, 1992). Modern health care has led to Americans living longer, and they have more disposable income than ever before (Lieberman & McCray, 1994). Americans over the age of 50 control half of the country's discretionary income and 75% of all personal assets (Grey Advertising, 1988; Mason, 2002; Wolfe, 1987).

A United Nations report recently noted that 16% of the U.S. population is 60 years of age or older, and predicts that this will rise to 27% by 2050 (Chamie, 2003). The U. N. report also predicts that by 2050 in developed nations:

the proportion of older persons is expected to be double that of children (32 per cent versus 16 per cent). As a result of these changes, the median age in the more developed regions, which rose from 28.6 years in 1950 to 37.3 in 2000, is projected to reach the unprecedented level of 45.2 years in 2050 (p. 15).

In the past decade, a strong interest has developed in the connection between communication and gerontology (Hilt, 1997; Nussbaum & Coupland, 1995; Riggs, 1998; Williams & Nussbaum, 2001). Elderly people spend more time with television, and they watch more TV than any other medium (Bower, 1973; Moss & Lawton, 1982; Nussbaum, Thompson, & Robinson, 1989). Older adults spend far more time watching TV than reading newspapers, and they watch more TV than any other age group (Atkins, Jenkins, & Perkins, 1990–1991; Moss & Lawton, 1982). Older viewer prefers news, documentaries, and public affairs (Bower, 1973; Davis, 1971; Davis, Edwards, Bartel, & Martin, 1976; Davis & Westbrook, 1985; Goodman, 1990; Korzenny & Neuendorf, 1980; Rubin & Rubin, 1982a, 1982b; Scales, 1996; Steiner, 1963; Wenner, 1976), and are major consumers of television news, preferring it to other media (Davis & Davis, 1985; Doolittle, 1979). Research conducted for the ABC Television Network found that viewers age 50 and older were significantly more interested in news than younger generations (Wurtzel, 1992).

At the same time, the elderly are increasingly among the new consumers of online information. The UCLA Center for Communication Policy found that Internet use was more popular among the 56 and older crowd than among teens (Cole, 2003). Internet users watch less television than non-users. The Pew Internet & American Life Project found that wired seniors are inspired by information and social contacts, particularly those related to family and health (Associated Press, 2001). At the same time, however, older people—particularly some older women—are reluctant to use the Internet (Adler, 2003).

CMC, E-mail, Web Surfing, and Online News and Information

The Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) literature has explored the important influence of new media technology in creating interaction, online communities, and a sense of identity for various groups (Barnes, 2001). For older people, information websites appear to be important (Burnett & Marshall, 2003). Internet technology may be particularly important in addressing social change with respect to American families (Surratt, 2001). Personal and family web usage allows people to share information over great distances (Barnes, 2003).

Technology and new media also have been studied from the perspective of their uses (Pavlik, 1996) and gratifications (Lin, 1993), as well as their cultural importance (Stevenson, 1995). The use of online media, most recently, has been addressed as cyberculture—focusing on communities and individual identities (Bell, 2001; du Gay, Evans, & Redman, 2000; Jones, 1997).

In the case of the elderly who reside in long-term care facilities, one study found a series of barriers to continued use of the Internet: physical and cognitive factors; individual differences; hardware and

software problems; scheduling conflicts; and uncomfortable computer lab conditions (Namazi & McClintic, 2003). However, no research can be found that studied older people living independently and using computers.

The present qualitative, descriptive, and ethnographic research on one mid-sized American city sample offers insight into why older people are enthusiastic about online information. Further, the data explore how this group may be reached by traditional broadcast and other mass media. The community-based study of all socioeconomic groups explores the importance of media use and interpersonal influence as they relate to consumer behavior and cyberculture.

Methodology

Riggs (1998) conducted in-depth interviews with elderly individual's regarding their television usage; however, little research has been published on how the elderly adopt and use the Internet. This study adapted and extended Riggs' qualitative and ethnographic methodology to interview older Americans about their Internet use and observe their usage (Miller & Slater, 2000; Hine, 2000). A body of Internet research forms the basis for observations and structured interviews in order to study social change. Diffusion theory, for example, explores how ideas, innovation, and change spread through society (Rogers, 1995). Information can be described by the pattern of its flow through various communication channels.

Following Riggs' (1998) ethnographic study, the major components of the method were participant observation and personal interviews. Researchers observed and interviewed people 50 years of age and older in one Midwestern, mid-sized market. First, populations in retirement communities, villages, and facilities were identified. Cooperation from as wide as possible a range of socioeconomic conditions was sought. Specifically, the study targeted upscale, middle and lower income retirement communities and facilities; individual homeowners in a range of socioeconomic conditions; apartment dwellers; and others.

Results

The interviews yielded a wide range of interest and usage among the elderly. Participants were interviewed as they used the Internet. The youngest participant was 55, and the oldest was 84.

John, Age 71

John first used a personal computer about seven years ago. He has had a home computer for about three years. He took a summer non-credit university writing class, and he needed to learn word processing to do course work. He first learned computing and Internet research at a senior center computer lab. Now, he visits 15–20 websites each day, and he checks his e-mail several times a day. John uses Yahoo e-mail for his part-time job and for personal correspondence.

John has an interest in astronomy and uses the Web to keep up with the latest NASA and scientific information. Also, he visits the local newspaper website, *USA Today*, and *The New York Times* for news. He visits local television news websites for weather and “developing stories.” He sometimes visits CNN and ABC for news and science links. He has listened to college football game on the Web, and he occasionally has visited magazine websites. He tracks college sports scores, and, he views movie trailers and listens to classical music online.

John says he has sometimes been prompted to visit a website because of a television story, but he does not watch TV while surfing the Web. John is enthusiastic about the Internet: “It's like the whole world opens up to a person online.” He added:

I think back to what my father would have thought of this. And he would have said, "Wow, this is great!" ... It would be have been unbelievable to him that all of this is available right at hand, with a couple of clicks here and there, and there it is.

John perceives himself as using the Internet more than anyone he knows because he likes the immediacy: "I can know right now. I don't have to wait until the 10 o'clock news or the morning newspaper." As much as he likes the Internet, he dislikes the pop-up advertising. He now helps other seniors learn about the Internet. Although he believes he cannot force someone to be interested, he also believes there is something for everyone on the Internet: "Something that would invigorate the mind a little bit ... Help you, if not physically to get out of that chair, mentally to get out of that chair."

Jeanette, Age 67

Jeanette had very basic data entry computer experience from work, but she began using those skills more in 2002. She purchased a computer and used it to play games. At the library, she learned about computer classes. At first, she learned computer basics and then how to use e-mail to communicate with her son in Florida. She still does not use the computer as much as she wants to because she is busy with other activities, particularly church and gardening.

She has ten hours per month of free e-mail, but she plans to subscribe to a service for more time. She checks her e-mail every other day. She likes e-mail because she can take her time, "but you can't beat face-to-face" communication. When she gets online, she sometimes checks weather information and tries to search. "I don't really know what I'm doing; I just get on there and try to find something." She likes MSN, Yahoo, and NetZero for e-mail. She sometimes visits the local newspaper for "front-page" news: "I don't go into it because I really don't know how to go into it." She sometimes visits health and weather websites. She has watched TV and used the Internet at the same time. She notices and is interested in web addresses shown on TV, but generally is not able to access them.

Jeanette also found pop-up advertising on the Internet confusing. She has trouble navigating on the Web, and the ads direct her away from what she is trying to do.

Jeanette is very interested in playing games, and she has tried online games. Sometimes she has had difficulty getting online games to work. She would like to do more in this area. She gets confused between her access via the Internet Service Provider and the software used to access the Web. She is more likely to play games loaded on the hard drive of her computer than to go to an online game site.

Sister Joan, Age 76

In 1997, Joan purchased her first computer for letter-writing. She "pretty much taught [her]self" with help from friends and classes. In 1998, she began using e-mail. Now, she regularly visits her Dominican Sisters website and Yahoo for "headlines." She has a dial-up connection and avoids the using the Internet when she is expecting a telephone call. Sometimes, she plays an offline game. "I can't talk on the phone and be on the computer at the same time. So, when other people are trying to call me, that's a bit of a problem." She would prefer to have a constant Internet connection, but those options are too expensive. For now, she spends offline computer time working on a family tree or making greeting cards.

She likes the timeliness of e-mail delivery. She checks e-mail as often as twice each day. Most e-mail between the Sisters and other family are brief. When reading e-mail, she says she can "picture" the person writing a note.

She checks the local newspaper website but also continues to subscribe to the paper. “Once in a while” she checks local TV station websites. She “sometimes” checks a network TV news website for additional information on a story of interest. She is a registered nurse and “sometimes” visits health websites. She has book-marked favorites but usually just uses a search engine to find information. She infrequently visits magazine, weather, and auction sites.

Eunice, Age 84

Eunice first used a computer when she was 80. A friend advised her to take a class to learn how to use the computer a daughter living in another state had given her. Within six weeks, she was on the Internet and then purchased a new computer. Four years later, she was maintaining her own website.

She has relatives across the country and wants to communicate. The password protected family website allows for the sharing of personal information and photographs. When a family member adds content to the website, each participants gets an e-mail prompt; this happens regularly.

She checks e-mail once each day. She gets e-mail from family, friends, and online merchants.

She visits a variety a websites: the local newspaper, *The New York Times* (daily), network television stations, radio stations, and weather, sports, and shopping sites. Her television is in a different room. She sometimes turns it on and *listens* to TV while checking e-mail. Also, she listens to a lot of radio during the day.

She calls herself a “shopaholic,” frequently visiting online stores, such as her favorite, Eddie Bauer. She likes not paying sales tax and saving money on sale items.

Eunice overcame her fears of online shopping because of “secure” websites. Sometimes the online price is less than the in-store price. Also, she likes specialty shoes from Canada and buys online.

She has bid on and purchased items on e-Bay, learning how in a class.

Eunice has installed Real Player on her computer but does not know how to use multimedia files. She is interested in learning how to access audio and video files, and has downloaded games and played them.

Eunice sees the Internet as a “source of information.” The volume of information is what she likes most. However, she worries about spending too much time online:

I think maybe it draws me there too often. It takes up too much of my time, but I said after I retired, “I’ll never be lonesome.” Because if I’m bored, I can go there, and the time just passes.

She finds the Internet “remarkable.” Before the Internet, she spent more time volunteering at a local university health office.

Joe, Age 79

Joe purchased a computer in late 2000, knowing “absolutely nothing about” how to use it. For years, he had no interest, but his children convinced him:

I think it has extended my life. It's a constant challenge. I think I'm on the verge of Alzheimer's ... the mental exercise is fabulous.

He began in 2001 with a dial-up Internet connection. After a lot of problems, he switched to a high-speed cable modem, and his problems disappeared.

He has a daily Internet conversation with a friend in New Zealand, and reads his friend's local daily newspaper online to have something to talk about. He has an interest in amateur "Ham Radio," and he has seen some of those transmissions migrate to the web. Also, he reads a lot of e-mail. He forwards items to a group of friends he worked with 30 years ago.

Joe does not use the Internet for American mass media sites of any kind. He remains a local newspaper subscriber and reads the hard-copy edition. He does use websites for checking on severe weather conditions. He has purchased a couple of items online from Wal-Mart.

For the most part, Joe uses his computer for digital photography projects, including a slide show promoting his interest in a downtown trolley car line. Overall, he says, "I'm not an Internet type person."

Charlie, Age 69

Charlie first used a personal computer three years ago. He wanted to learn because he felt "totally illiterate," and he began using the Internet within four months to follow the stock market. He continues to check his stock prices daily on Excite and Yahoo. Following a European vacation, he visited websites about the places he had been.

He has purchased a second computer and continues to use a dial-up connection. He uses e-mail each evening to communicate with family, friends, and business associates. He is an instructor in a computer lab for senior citizens and thinks that the activity is important to them. He shows people how to access the local newspaper. He reads the online version rather than subscribing. Also, he reads *USA Today* and *PC World* online. He likes to forward articles to friends: "I like the idea that it's so fast. It's almost instant ... It's almost like being there." He continues to listen to local radio during the day and watches television at night, but he does not read newspapers as much as he once did.

As other interviewees mentioned, he most dislikes pop-up advertisements. However, they are no more than an annoyance for him. He saw as a personal advantage previous electronics experience (he repaired musical organs) because he was not afraid of the keyboard or computer.

Charlie concluded that the computer and Internet are "the most important invention" in his lifetime: "It gives me or anyone else the advantage of reaching out. I can go anywhere. It's an information source. Without it, what would I do?"

Overall, Charlie sees the Internet as a replacement for newspaper and library reading—a superior and faster way to obtain information about any of his special interests.

Mary, Age 70 and Margaret, Age 70

Mary and Margaret are twin sisters, and they were interviewed together at Mary's apartment in a housing authority low-income building for seniors. Margaret owns a house.

Mary first became interested in computers in 1997, but she was not using a computer at the time of the interview. She was concerned about being able to receive telephone calls. She experimented with WebTV but did not like it. Her granddaughter helped her. On Web TV Mary used the Internet for e-mail, movie reviews, and checking health websites, but she quit using it by 2002. At first, she liked WebTV but says it changed over time. She had difficulty disconnecting from the subscription service. At the time of the interview in early 2003, Margaret was urging Mary to buy a computer and get back on the Internet. She even offered to give her a free monitor. Margaret is interested in the Internet because:

I want to get in on things. Find out stuff that's going on. I want to try some of this e-Bay stuff. I want to see some of the big garage sale stuff. I like a lot of the current stuff coming on ... If you know how to get into these different places, you can get a lot of information on that.

Margaret had been using computer bulletin boards 20 years ago. Her son took an electronics course and sparked her interest. Also, she worked at a cemetery and worked with computerized records. Over time, the Internet captured her interest:

Well, I don't think there's anything you can't do on the Internet anymore. There's games. There's jokes. You find lost relatives. You talk to people overseas.

Margaret said 90% of her computer use is e-mail. She checks it four times each day on an inexpensive dial-up service. She volunteers at the library and stills works with computerized records. She uses the Internet to trace genealogy, check weather, preview movies, and buy on e-Bay. She visits the local newspaper website, and uses Google to look for other information:

If you think it a little differently in your head, you can come up with different websites on it, too. It's just marvelous. 'Cause you can go to bed at night and all of the sudden something will pop in your head and you'll wonder if I can find that. It's amazing what you can come up with ... Things you've always wondered about, and there it is.

Margaret found Web URLs difficult to type, and Google easier to use than Yahoo. The twins contrasted the Internet with going to the library when they were school children, and the librarian would not let them touch certain books. Now, Margaret enjoys Internet jokes: “You can't stay depressed on e-mail.”

Margaret appeared most enthused about the potential of e-Bay. She had just purchased a digital camera and was planning to become a seller. She had purchased several items.

The twins both said they had visited websites that were suggested by television programs. They disliked pop-up advertising on the Internet. Despite the annoyance, Margaret said it still seems like magic:

It's foolish not to get into it. Especially for older people. On a cloudy afternoon, you can sit there and talk to people all over the world. And no charge. That's the sweet part. And the jokes that come across. Oh, wow! Somebody thinks them all up.

Although Mary enjoys the Internet, she remains concerned that she would not be able to do it without support from “kids.” Margaret believes older people need to have friends using the Internet—people who can help answer questions and interpret instructions. “We speak a different language than you guys.” Asked if the Internet is better than television, Margaret responded forcefully: “Get real. There's no comparison.” The twins no longer watch daytime television, and Margaret says she sleeps less to have more time online.

Judy, Age 65

Judy started using a computer at work in the 1980s. Her brother-in-law gave her a computer in 2000. At first, she called him “every other day” for help. She mainly checks e-mail and does word processing. She uses the Web to check her bank statement, cartoons, the Mayo Clinic, and other health sites. She checks information on prescription drugs. “New diagnosis, or whatever. I do it more for research than anything else.”

She checks e-mail daily: “It keeps me in touch without having to go out. When you get to be my age, you don't want to go out that much anymore.” She loves jokes and cartoons. She wished everyone had e-mail because she enjoys keeping in touch with family members who do.

She subscribes to the local newspaper and also checks that website before it is delivered. She watches cable television for weather. Her concerns for security keep her from shopping online or doing online banking. "It scares me." She uses the Web to visit religious sites, and reads online movie reviews.

She likes the convenience of the Internet: "It's just there. You don't have to go to a library and look it up in a reference book." She dislikes the slow dial-up speed of Juno, but she cannot afford a cable modem service.

Liz, Age 55

Liz began using a personal computer in 1998. Her husband set up and maintains the home computer. Liz uses it mainly for word processing and e-mail. Her husband accesses the Internet regularly. She prefers reading and watching cable television channels.

Liz is a retired schoolteacher and teacher union president. She never had a computer in the classroom, but the union office was computerized. She learned Word and acquired an e-mail address. When asked about her use of the Internet she said:

I haven't really. No. No, and I've taken classes ... I went to two or three of them. Whatever I signed up for. And they said, "Here's how you use the Internet." Well, I haven't done it. This is not my first interest, and so I don't. I'm still back with reading a good book and highlighting the hell out of parts I want to remember. And writing letters to people, and sending it snail mail.

She does use e-mail for political action. She has friends and relatives in nearby cities and uses e-mail every other day for communication. She and her husband use an economical, low-speed dial-up service, which is commercial-free.

Marge, Age 71 and Cindi, Age 62

Marge and Cindi were interviewed at a senior wellness center computer lab. Cindi had been using a computer for three years. Marge, a retired secretary, had used a computer for 20 years, and she began using the Internet about six years ago. Marge's daughter encouraged her to connect to a high-speed cable modem, but she found it too expensive and changed to dial-up.

Marge uses the Internet for e-mail and some information, but she said she does not "surf" the Web. Cindi also has e-mail with family and friends, and she checks but does not do banking online. Marge checks e-mail daily, but Cindi checks it less frequently. Marge and Cindi both have received photographs of grandchildren via e-mail attachments.

Neither of the women were enthusiastic about the Internet as a source of news, but they sometimes checked the Web for entertainment, weather, and special interest items. Cindi has used her America Online account to listen to music. Both women have seen websites mentioned on morning network television, and they have checked, for example, online recipes.

Both women mentioned book reviews, movie reviews, and health websites, as sites in which they are interested, Marge reads about preventive health and prescription drugs, and she plays bridge online. Cindi has watched her son buy and sell on e-Bay, but she has not:

I look it up on there, and then I turn around and call them. I'm nervous about putting my credit card on there. I know that's stupid because it's just as stupid to do it over the telephone.

Cindi is a regular viewer and buyer from QVC—a cable TV shopping network. She looks at items on their website, but she calls to buy. Cindi goes online while watching TV. Both women like the

convenience of the timeliness of online information. Both women complained about “spam” e-mail and pop-up Web advertising. After an 11 day hospital stay, Marge had 293 junk e-mails.

Marge found the Internet useful when she needed to obtain her Pennsylvania birth certificate. She was able to pay for it online and received it a few days later. Cindi, at the urging of a friend, went online to get her Missouri birth certificate. She found it easier than struggling with an automated telephone system.

Bob, Age 83

Bob has had a computer for one year, after his son urged him to get one. His church gave him a used computer. A friend connected it for him to Juno. He has learned e-mail and word processing. Bob has never surfed the Web: “I haven't seen anything that I was really interested in to do that, and besides, if I was interested, I wouldn't know how to do it.”

He checks his e-mail everyday. “It's fun for me to do.” He writes short notes of “a line or two,” but he does not find it “essential.” He prefers to use local and long-distance telephone calls as an easier way to speak with his children. Bob has had occasional trouble getting his computer to work. He has a friend who helps get it working again. His e-mail is with family members, a few church members, and people from his old neighborhood.

Overall, Bob does not anticipate an increase in his use of the computer. At 83, he says he is just not very interested in online information. He prefers television re-runs, local television news, network television news, morning radio, the local newspaper, *Readers Digest*, *Prevention*, and *Men's Health*. He has a collection of ten compact disks, and he enjoys listening to music.

Discussion

The older people in the present study displayed a wide range of interests, abilities, experiences, and environmental conditions with respect to their computer usage. Older Americans, like other groups, vary in their use of the Internet. The participants in this study all used e-mail, and it was most important to them. When this group of older people did surf the Web, they were more likely to seek information about their special interests rather than mass media. Some were interested in online shopping and auctions. They were most likely to use Google or Yahoo to find sites dealing with weather, health, games, jokes, and entertainment information. Participants were observed having a lot of difficulty navigating the Web, and they relied upon search engines to guide them. For most, a search engine was their starting home page. E-mail with family and friends was a regular and often daily part of their lives. While some had been in a chat room, none continued to participate.

The results of this exploratory study are not promising for traditional mass media on the Web. Local television news sites, for example, would need to be redesigned as portals of information about health, entertainment, and weather to be of great use to older Americans. Overall, our participants expressed little interest in what the media offered. They see the Internet more as a functional replacement for the library rather than mass media. They tended to be newspaper subscribers, radio listeners, and television viewers rather than Web surfers.

Programmers, sales managers, and advertisers face an enormous challenge with respect to the Internet. On vital health information, for example, the Mayo Clinic offers source and message credibility that is difficult to match. If media partnered with such sites, these older people would still go directly to the sites they trust. Further, mechanisms such as pop-up advertising tend to be annoying to this group.

These older people did sometimes belong to online communities of friends, family, and interest groups, but they did not recognize them as such. Most often, they shared regular e-mail with a small number of people.

This study validated the difficulties in getting older people to adopt new technologies. It takes family members, friends, local groups, and computer classes to overcome apprehension and confusion. Older people found computer jargon difficult, and they were easily stalled by simple problems. At the same time, the older people in this study expressed great enthusiasm for their access to massive amounts of information.

This study was limited to a pilot group of older Internet users. Future research needs to explore issues related to those who have not been online. Age is one variable that influences use. Other influences include work experiences, technical aptitude, supportive atmosphere for learning, and the limitation of being on a fixed income.

During the past decade, the first group of older Americans went online. The picture may change dramatically as baby-boomers reach retirement age. In the future, it will be more likely that older people will be comfortable with the Internet and online media. The task facing mass media organizations is to meet the needs and interests of this diverse group, which already constitutes the bulk of their current audience. The Internet has opened a large doorway to information. Inevitably, older peoples' interest in websites takes time away from traditional media use.

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