

Maintaining Connections

Octo- and Nonagenarians on Digital ‘Use and Non-use’

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Abstract

The concepts of user and non-user are frequently deployed within media and communications literature. What do these terms mean if examined regarding age and ageing? In this article we explore and trouble these notions through an analysis of twenty-two conversations with a group of octogenarians and nonagenarians living in a retirement home. Their descriptions of their changing uses of media throughout lifetime, and their encounters with mobile phones, computers, newspapers, television, radio and landline phones, are presented as a set of ‘techno-biographies’ that challenge binary divisions of use and non-use, linear notions of media adoption, and add texture to the idea of ‘the fourth age’ as a time of life bereft of decisional power. Speaking with octogenarians and nonagenarians provides insights into media desires, needs and uses, and opens up ‘non-use’ as a complex, variegated activity, rather than a state of complete inaction or disinterest.

Keywords: ageing, octo- & nonagenarian, digital communication media, use, non-use

Introduction

In a German television skit that went viral in 2013 (Knallerfrauen 2013), a visibly older man prepares food with his daughter in a kitchen. They stand back to back, chatting, as he chops vegetables and she cooks. She asks him how he likes his new iPad. He replies that it is very useful. She turns around to see that he is using it as a cutting board and then watches him perfunctorily place the device in the dishwasher, to the sound of canned laughter from the audience.

This anecdotal example is replete with irony and mixed messages. On the one hand, the older ‘user’ is represented as naïve: he does not really understand what he has in his hands. On the other, his irreverent attitude towards the proper use of this luxury item pokes fun at the status of the tablet, transforming it from a high-tech digital device to a chopping block. In all of its ambiguities, the skit speaks to the main concerns of this article. How do we understand the practices of older users of technology? Is there such a thing as (im)proper use of a digital device? What might we have to learn if we set aside our ideas of *the right (or wrong) way* to use something and listen to what participants tell us about how they use a medley of devices to maintain, filter or cut their connection to the world?

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As industrialised nations undergo a demographic shift towards ageing populations there is a growing interest in media studies on how older people engage with digital communication devices. Yet, what counts as old in the digital world varies. For those interested in game studies, for example, to be 45 is considered to be an ‘older gamer’ (Consalvo 2012). In Canada, the wireless and telecommunication industry classifies the 55 plus as an ‘older user’ (Sawchuk & Crow 2011). While there is a growing attention paid to the transition of baby boom generations to a large older population, what still tends to be absent from the research agenda is the perspective of people associated to the ‘old-old’ or the ‘deep old age’ (Higgs & Gilleard 2015). These terms do not refer to a specific age group but rather to a social imaginary, the ‘fourth age’. Lying in the shadows of the ‘culture of the third age’, which promotes ageing as active, healthy, productive or successful, the fourth age stands for ‘real’ old age and is fashioned by ‘discourses of frailty and associated vulnerability and by the powerlessness of those unable to adequately maintain their connection to the desirable, civilized world of later life’ (Higgs & Gilleard 2015: viii). It thus stands in sharp contrast with the agency associated with the third age since we tend to imagine that ‘[t]here are no chosen choices in the fourth age. What may appear as choices – regarding food, clothing or activity [in our case, of media use] – are the attributions of choice created by others’ actions, a hyper-reality of choice’ (ibid: 17).

To gain insight into ageing with media technology and to explore the idea of the fourth age through this lens, we conducted a pilot project with residents in a retirement home in Canada in May 2012, half of them over 90 years of age. While our initial impetus was to focus on mobile phones as a point of entry into a broad range of issues on contemporary media practices, our outline and preparations included the possibility for participants to discuss a wide range of media. The conversations reveal the entangled and complicated relations that this group, typically categorised as the ‘old older’ (Neugarten 1996), has with a range of media technologies and their tactics for maintaining connection to others. Conversations detailed how they use some digital devices; how they used to use others but no longer need to use them; how they share devices, or how they borrow the devices of their visitors to give but a few examples. The complexity of these engagements leads us to question the concept of ‘use’ as the diametrical counterpart to ‘non-use’. While we cannot claim that the affluent octogenarians and nonagenarians we met constitute a representative sample of this population, the research experience nevertheless provides insight into use and non-use and our suppositions about what it means to age and experience what may be imagined as the fourth age, within a context of ever-changing media technologies and devices.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

Our perspective on use, non-use, and older adults is influenced mostly by researchers working in ageing studies and cultural studies of mobile media. From these perspectives, mobile devices, such as tablet computers, cell phones or laptops, are not just neutral channels for the diffusion of information between people. Communication technologies are symbolic entities that involve rituals and practices of use and influence our relations to others and the world around us (Carey 1992). In addition to providing information, these technologies ‘import shape and texture to being, feeling and doing’ (DeNora 2000:

152) and as such they help constitute the world as it is experienced, mediate our connections to other people, including our attachment to significant others.

Research on older users often contains normative injunctions on ‘appropriate use’ that tend to equate non-use with a series of problems that digital technology could solve. Zheng et al. (2012) are among those who consider that ‘clearly, technology use among older adults is a quickly growing phenomenon, with beneficial outcomes for those who choose to participate’. This normative conception of (non-)use, which tacitly valorises only the users of technologies, is increasingly challenged. For example, Wyatt (2003) points out that the category of ‘non-use’ obscures the rich heterogeneity of non-use, as well as the underlying rationales of those who do not want to consume or purchase every device potentially available – also in the case of older people (Fernández-Ardévol 2016).

This perspective on the complexity of use mirrors empirical research by Selwyn (2003), Buse (2010) and Ziegler and Schwanen (2011), who stress the heterogeneity of engagement by older adults depending on their personal trajectories and preferred communication practices. Lenhart and Horrigan (2003) coin the term ‘digital spectrum’ to consider the ways individuals access or use the available communications media as a series of gradations. Cross-cultural research on ageing points out that older adults are not a uniform group, whose members become all the same once they reach a certain chronological age (Sokolovsky 2009). Within age studies, Loos et al. (2012), Gullette (2004) and Katz (2009), amongst others, discuss how understandings of ageing as a linear sequence of events in time is a persistent discursive trope that does not capture the many ways that different people, and cultures, experience temporality, time and ageing. Important to this article is Higgs and Gilleard’s idea of the fourth age (2015) considered not as a variable or stable age category but as a part of a socio-cultural imaginary dominated by ideas and images that are antonymous to those associated with the ‘third age’ – older adults in their post-retirement years most often depicted as engaged in a world of choices. As we intimated earlier, our work adds to their reflections on the fourth age by furnishing empirical examples of how those who would naturally be assumed to inhabit it, octogenarians and nonagenarians, negotiate and decide to engage or disengage with particular media.

We use ‘media’ in the plural, an important aspect of our theoretical perspective. Media are the means of communication and, particularly, include information and communication technologies (ICTs). In everyday life, users of media, including older adults (Ratzenböck 2016, Ivan & Hebblethwaite 2016) inhabit rich and multifarious communications environments. Rather than seeing media as a sequence of adoptions over time, we look at the choices individuals do at different moments. In doing so, we make the fewest normative assumptions (Slater 2013) and pay attention to ‘the context in which communication processes occur’ (Foth & Hearn 2007: 9) and the whole media structure (Tacchi et al. 2003). We take into account that mediated communication often meshes into patterns of activities (Ball-Rokeach 1985) within everyday life. For example, as Frissen (2000) suggests in her study of mobile phones in parenting practices, it is vital to provide detailed accounts of how and when they are used, as well as the conflicted feelings that participants may have about the decisions they are making. Here, the difference between (non-)use and practice is relevant. On the one hand, (non-) use involves some individual contact with or manipulation of a device. On the other,

practice is a socio-cultural phenomenon and a useful concept to ‘enable the analysis of the social connections among individuals, collectives, organisations, institutions, the situated contexts in which these connections take specific form, and all the intermediary [physical objects, artefacts, or discourses] utilized by them’ (Gherardi 2006: xviii).

Methodology

It is within this theoretical and intellectual context that we embarked on our pilot project in a high-end retirement home located in an affluent neighbourhood in Toronto (Ontario, Canada). Our six-person team of interviewers, composed of researchers from different linguistic, cultural, disciplinary and epistemological backgrounds, used a set of protocols developed by one of our team members for the study of mobile phones (non-)uses amongst seniors (Fernández-Ardèvol & Arroyo 2012) that was applied in different countries (see Fernández-Ardèvol 2016). The questions were discussed in advance, and the team had a training session to prepare for the interviews. While the protocols provided an initial set of guiding questions, we followed a flexible design that would allow us to incorporate the specific circumstances of our research experience (Maxwell 2005) into the research process. The questions were complemented by a short questionnaire and by the personal notes each researcher took after the interviews.

The semi-structured interviews, voice-recorded and transcribed verbatim, focused on the residents’ relationship with mobile phones. Knowing that participants were likely to be using other media, as communication media are not used in isolation, we also asked about them (landline, mobile phone, Internet, or letters, but also TV and radio); the people and institutions they communicated with in their everyday life; and how they engaged with the communication channels they used. We were also prepared to ask mobile phone users about the specific services they used, the uses of the handset and the role played by the phone in their everyday life.

The residence staff took care of recruiting participants, who were paid for their time. The average length of the interviews was 37 minutes – the shortest lasted less than 20 minutes, and the longest over an hour. Interviews took place in different public or private locations in the residence, at the participants’ discretion. All but one were individual interviews conducted in English; one couple requested to be interviewed together and in Spanish. We refer to the participants with a fictional name followed by their age. We spoke to 18 women and four men, and half of the participants were in their nineties; the oldest was 98 and the youngest 75, the only one in her seventies.

Some participants had mobility issues, and either had to use walkers or canes or required assistance. Some had cognitive impairments, including short-term memory problems or temporary disorientation. All were able to participate in the interviews and gave their consent, although in some cases cognitive difficulties conditioned the conversation. What we focus on here are the participants’ discourses and the way they explain their reality to the interviewer.

The interviews were analysed using qualitative applied thematic analysis (Guest et al. 2012). This includes carefully reading and re-reading transcripts and the rest of the material, noting emerging themes and concepts, and discussing and organising larger thematic categories. To further develop the analysis, the researchers wrote short techno-biographies based on the interviews and interactions with participants. Techno-

biographies combine and adapt different qualitative data collection techniques to focus on past and present situations (Blythe et al. 2002); some focus explicitly on information and communication technologies (Henwood et al. 2001). As others have argued, techno-biographies constitute a powerful tool to examine how communication technologies are appropriated and play a role in changing experiences across the lifespan. They may enhance our understanding of personal experiences with ICTs in general (Kennedy 2003) and mobile telephony in particular, allowing the researcher to provide a nuanced analysis of the narratives of each participant regarding their present relationship with a wide range of old and new media.

We reflect on the conversations we had with the participants in three distinct but inter-related ways that juxtapose methodological strategies coherent with different research traditions. First, we organise the interviews into three basic categories, depending on the relationship individuals have with mobile phones and computers: current users, ex-users and never users. These combine into nine potential permutations of use and non-use that we consider as heuristic tools rather than objective descriptions of individual trajectories. We follow this mapping of the possible permutations with the techno-biographies of the interviewees, adding a narrative dimension to our understanding of the participants' perspectives regarding mobile phones and other mediated communication. Building on these techno-biographies we then turn to how they express five modes of engagement related to their decisions and patterns of use: the need for connectivity; the desire to be always reachable; the need to filter and manage the amount of technology in their lives; the ways they circumscribe their use; and finally, if they express an affective attachment to a particular device.

Discussion

Beyond the discrete classification of user and non-user

When we sat down to talk with the participants, we were surprised by what we encountered. Some of the interviewees were not current users of mobile phones, but had used them and therefore considered themselves users. Others said they were mobile phone users, when in fact, they relied exclusively on a cordless phone in their apartments. Some did not own phones, yet decided to talk to us because they had others in their family who did when they came to visit. Still, others wanted to talk about their histories with other media technologies and had opinions on the impact and influence of digital communication tools on the world around them that they wanted to share.

From our interviews, one can create a table that lays out the participants' relationships to mobile phones and computers in three ways: as current users, ex-users, and never users. From this set, nine different combinations emerge (see Table 1). Use and non-use are commonly accepted categories, and we are interested in exploring the complexities of the everyday activities, contexts, and practices they refer to. They are not important by themselves but as heuristic tools to bring into light the heterogeneity of the ways (older) people relate to digital media and devices. We focus on computers and mobile phones to organise the analysis not only because of their salience in today's knowledge society but also given their relevance and variability in the case study.

Table 1. Participants classified according to their relationship to mobile phones and computers

Computer	Mobile phone			N
	Current user	Ex-user	Never a user	
Current user	3	2	4	9
Ex-user	0	1	3	4
Never a user	3	1	5	9
N	6	4	12	22

Six participants were mobile phone users, four had given up using it at some point, and twelve had never had one. Computers, conversely, were more popular: there were nine current users, four former users and nine participants who had never used a computer. All computer users had some – current or past – experience with online services, with e-mail being the service most often mentioned.

This is a simple graphic depiction of some aspects of the heterogeneity of what we understand to be digital media (non-)users. The complicated permutations of media use and non-use become visible when taking into account just two devices, in this case the computer and the mobile phone. As this table indicates, there is a wide spectrum of access (Lenhart & Horrigan 2003) and use. It changes over time, or, perhaps more accurately, there is a variable and wide constellation of ways that these users of mobile devices and computers shift their use practices through time. As we reviewed our interview data, we realised that while the table usefully reveals a plethora of permutations, it rendered invisible other variations. For example, some individuals stopped using the computer for a period of time and started using it again. There were also ‘indirect’ users who accessed services, like Skype, through close relatives, whom we classified as non-users of computers because they have never used one independently. To address these limitations and to better take into account nuances, differences, and variations we now turn to the stories that lie behind these numbers and this schematic classification.

Techno-biographies

In this section, we narrativise fundamental aspects of our conversations with the participants to highlight the media use decisions made by this particular group of octo- and nonagenarians who, according to the social imaginary of the fourth age, are not expected to have agency and make choices. In all cases, but one, the landline phone continues to play a role in the whole media structure of their everyday lives even as they adopt or drop other media. What also becomes evident from the interview material and the techno-biographies are five ways that participants express their desire and need to engage with a particular media: 1) Media are for maintaining *connections* with people with whom they have a deep prior relationship. 2) Mobile phones are important for being able to *reach* someone – and to be reached quickly – in case of an emergency. 3) These seniors engage in *filtering* different media in and out of their lives, depending on what they want to manage and what they think is an appropriate use of a particular media form for a particular type of communication. 4) They *circumscribe* their use of

media by defining what amount of time they devote to it, or because of the extent of the networks they want to maintain. 5) Finally, the octo and nonagenarians express forms of *attachment* to particular media, which influence their decisions about what is an appropriate communication device to use in particular circumstances. To expand on the nine initial permutations, we underscore the distinct ways that the participants discussed their engagements with mobile phones, computers and other types of media (such as television) or communications devices (such as the landline phone) and provide a few examples of these engagements.

a) Current users of mobile phones (with or without computer)

Among current users of mobile phones, Margaret, 83, describes a long-term use. In 1994, she and her husband bought a mobile ‘car phone’ that ‘belonged to the car’. The phone made them feel safer to travel despite her husband’s illness. It is Margaret who had always taken care of the device. However, when her husband passed away, Margaret changed her approach: she now considers the mobile phone as something personal, not a device associated with car travel and emergency use. When the phone became hers alone, Margaret began to carry it with her at all times. While she continues to define it as an ‘emergency phone’, retaining this basic rationale from her previous experience, what constitutes an emergency shifts from one that was health-based to the need for contact with all members of ‘her close knit family’. For Margaret connectivity and reachability are synonymous and intertwined. It is important to her that her family members are permanently available, and always reachable, to each other. Margaret has a clear set of protocols for her mobile phone usage: she always answers her mobile immediately. Further, having the mobile with her at all times means that she does not have to stay in her room in the residence, ‘babysitting’ the landline, although as she says, if she receives a call on her mobile, she may switch to the landline if she is in her apartment. While she distinguishes her use of the mobile and her landline, Margaret’s words express her deep attachment to her mobile. ‘It is a part of me’, she declares.

The use practices of phone devices are often tied to the participant’s history as a member of a couple; they tend to stay the same as people age together as a couple, and to change when individuals age as widowers or widows. Shared or not within couples, the mobile phone is more often than not about the capacity to be reached at all times, and to reach out in case of emergencies. Use practices may also differ according to the functional capacities deemed intrinsic to the device or the form of communication they support: for one participant, familiar landline phones afford ‘deeper’ conversations whereas mobile phones allow more practical or goal-oriented ones. In these ways they filter what media they continue to maintain, and what media they forego.

b) Ex-users of mobile phones (with or without computers)

When motivations for owning a particular technological device (like a mobile phone) disappear, individuals often stop using it. They become ex-users. There are, however, various reasons why some octo- and nonagenarians start using a particular device, such as the mobile phone, and after a while decide to give it up. For instance, May, 89, decided to purchase a mobile when the device became relatively inexpensive ‘because everybody had one’. While she candidly admits that her memory is not very good any-

more, ‘I don’t think I used it much’, she says, having realised that she did not need it. Valerie, 94, bought her first mobile phone in the 1990s on the recommendation of her children. She gave up owning it when she stopped her regular 100 km driving for work reasons. Another participant in this category, Mary, 95, stopped using the mobile phone and the computer at some point but currently uses a desktop. Her techno-biography illustrates how perceptions of the usefulness of digital devices may change with ageing as everyday activities evolve: ‘Now (...) I’m not doing what I used to do. (...) I was out a lot, but not now.’ She used to have a mobile phone for ‘emergencies’ but it broke when she was already living in the residence, about three years before we met her. She never replaced it because it was not ‘really vital’ to her. She describes how she must limit her activities, due to her age, and this includes her use of the computer, which she uses circumspectly. She stopped using it a while ago but has started using the one that is available at the residence’s library to communicate with her granddaughter, who lives abroad: ‘I picked it up again, I don’t like jokes [...], but look how it’s coming handy [...] and wonderful. One of my grandchildren and her family is in Dubai [...]. I can email them and my granddaughter replies.’ An indirect user of Skype, she has a very positive opinion of the platform, which she has used once at her daughter’s home.

Beyond the heterogeneity of reasons why participants stopped using certain media, what becomes relevant is how they understand non-use – as a decision that they are entitled to make because of their age and life circumstances. As it is the case of one interviewee, age can free one from the need or felt obligation of having to be reachable at all times and to engage in constant communication.

c) Never users of mobile phones and ex-computer users

Four of the octogenarians we spoke to had never used a mobile phone and also stopped using computers at some point in their lives. Lena, 87, however, refers to her cordless phone as her ‘mobile phone’ since it gives her mobility within the apartment. She would use a computer again if they provided new ones in the residence. She is articulate about her media and communication needs: she identifies the landline as crucial, and she wants to make sure she will be able to answer any incoming call. She has a negative opinion of mobile phones. She considers that not all seniors have the same attachment to technological devices, thanks in part to different life trajectories: ‘Certainly a sixty-seven-year-old [20 years younger than her] would have more of the technology available to them and interesting to them than to me’. She does not feel estranged from the world ‘out there’ and even though she currently does fewer things than she used to do, she feels strongly about being responsible for deciding what to do and what not to do.

For this group of octo- and nonagenarians who never used a mobile phone and who have given up computers, the landline phone is a vital lifeline to others. One participant cast the phone and the computer in critical terms because of the harm that they may cause. In two other cases, although not considered detrimental to society, the mobile phone is deemed inappropriate for them and therefore something that they decided not to let into their lives. The computer, on the other hand, has been filtered out of their lives for different reasons: too much trouble to maintain, too impersonal medium for communication, or too complicated to operate.

d) Never users of mobile phones and computer users

Clair, 87, is one of four octogenarians who never had a mobile phone and yet continue to use computers to maintain a wide network of social relations. She bought her first computer in 1998, when she was 63 years old and started working from home as a freelance journalist and advertising agent. The computer is important to her, and she upgraded it the moment she moved to the residency. While the landline is like her ‘breath’, she says, the computer is ‘almost like a limb, like part of my body’. She is strongly attached to these devices and understands what they bring to her – connection. She sees the computer as an integral part of her identity, one that gives her the ability to stay connected to others. From her perspective, she does not need a mobile phone. She lives a busy life in a world composed of friends and family who live both nearby and abroad, and with whom she maintains contact through the landline and the Internet. She has established routines that allow her fluid communication with her children and grandchildren in South Africa. She also uses the computer to read news and share stories with her friends. She turns to the computer to write and to play games. Being aware that communication is an embodied process, that staying in front of the computer for too long can create both isolation and physical pain, she tries to limit its use.

e) Never-users of mobile phones and computers

Two participants had never used a mobile phone or a computer, and relied on the landline for connection and other media for information. Zeff, 98, is the oldest participant in the project. He has decided which technologies he wants in his life, informing us that he is affluent enough to purchase whatever device he wants. His world is growing smaller and smaller, he told us: except for his children, he has few friends left to whom he can talk on the phone. He often meets with family members face-to-face, using the landline phone as an instrument for coordinating these encounters. He keeps up with current events by watching television, his preference being news and sports programs. He has never felt any pressure to own a mobile phone or a computer and has had very little exposure to them during his working life. He retired in 1984 when he was 70 years old. As he explains, at that time a company’s senior manager was not expected to use computers: ‘We had them in the office for the bookkeeping and stuff, but I didn’t [use any].’ At the time of his retirement, the mobile phone had just been released but it was not yet an essential business tool. Never having used these technological devices is something that these participants can talk about and contextualise regarding their past experiences and current wishes, desires, and needs.

Modes of engagement

One’s communication goals (Ball-Rokeach 1985) can be met in a multiplicity of ways, using a variety of different media channels – at any age. The majority of octogenarians and nonagenarians in our study explain how they identify with the landline phone as a key way to keep in touch with family and friends, often discussing the use of the landline and face to face interactions in very similar terms: as genuine and authentic forms of communications. For most participants, television and radio continue to play a role in maintaining connection to world events. Yet, the octogenarians and nonagenarians we

interviewed have developed very complex relationships to mobile phones and computers, including different rules and rationales to explain how and why they use different devices to maintain connection and in some cases to disconnect. They articulate the decisional processes used to make choices (filter) of what media to keep in their lives based on a variety of rationales (Tétard & Collan 2007, Collan & Tétard 2009), contingent life-situations and life trajectories. We now turn to the five actions that inform their modes of engagement with communication media and technologies.

Connecting

All participants have found ways to stay connected to the world or their networks in different ways, through particular sets of communication devices, at different rhythms, more or less intensely. Voice calls, be they through mobile or landline phones, constitute the preferred mode of mediated communication. Mobile users add an extra layer of mediated communication as the general norm is to also have a landline in their apartment. This relates not only to the purchasing power of the residents but also to the long history of fixed telephony in Canadian society in general (Sawchuk & Crow 2010, 2011). As the techno-biographies show, more participants continue to use computers and the Internet than mobile phones, carrying their knowledge and sense of familiarity with these technologies with them from their homes to the residence. To connect to the world beyond their personal networks, participants rely mainly on mass media (television and radio, mostly), although they in some cases turn to the Internet for news and information.

Filtering

Many of our participants discuss how they filter particular types of media technologies from their homes and lives, or give them specific and limited uses, depending on what they understand and value in communications. For some participants, hand-writing a letter is an act of love while composing a letter on the computer is too impersonal. For others, the landline phone is equivalent to face to face communication and therefore wholly appropriate for maintaining connection to family and friends. For yet another, being reachable anywhere anytime is valued as a sign of intimacy and therefore used to maintain connection and ties. Filtering is related to deciding what digital devices one wants to own and care for. While all participants filtered what media they used, this is not because they have stopped living – instead, they are deciding what they prefer, need and can manage in their current context.

Circumscription

The octo- and nonagenarians in our study also engaged in circumscribing, or limiting, their activities to cope with changes – mental and physical capacities, personal interests, life circumstances, and health conditions, to name some of the ones that interviewees considered especially meaningful. While people may circumscribe their activities throughout their life course, this dimension might be more prominent, or more evident, in the specific context of our case study, which gives us better opportunity to discuss the dynamics it generates. Circumscription, as a form of maintaining a sense of agency,

is a particular process of adaptation that involves delineating spaces, times, networks, etc., hence modifying one's environment as one ages.

Reachability

Participants manage reachability in different ways. They can, or cannot, rely on a mobile phone but are connected to their personal network and their world, having chosen how they want to be reached, and decided what media they would rely on to do so. Being reachable and being able to reach significant ones is an important motivation for having a mobile phone. Some participants describe micro-coordination (Ling & Yttri 2002) as the main incentive for having a mobile phone, while others see it as an emergency tool. Even though it constitutes a lifeline (Oksman & Turtiainen 2004, Ling, 2004: 34), seniors use it in everyday life communications that not only respond to emergencies (Castells et al. 2006: 97).

Attachment

Attachment to the media varies among users, even for those who describe the mobile phone as an emergency tool. In some cases it is a utilitarian device that allows a couple to be mobile and get the services they need. In others, it became integral to everyday life – one participant carried it everywhere she went. To her, the mobile phone is about connectivity to her loved significant ones and a sign that she is always reachable, always available, to her children.

Final remarks

As our conversations with octo- and nonagenarians indicate, the relationship of 'older old' with media and ICT is heterogeneous. The discrete classification of these participants into users or non-users do not capture the richness of the experiences, situations, and life circumstances of this population. The participants' experiences of mobile telephony, the computer, the Internet or the landline phone are dynamic. They change as circumstances and interests do. While further research might support our approach, this article contributes to further problematise media technology and to critically explore the experiences of older people (Östlund 2004). Most participants still subscribe to the notion of 'old' linked to third age as a cultural field organised around the issue of choice. To the extent that it values activity (even when it is not frequent or intense) and emphasises their ability to decide for themselves, the discourse of these octo- and nonagenarians about their variegated (non-)uses of media and communication technologies appears to be informed by positive representations of ageing. Despite their chronological age, some issues related to dementia and memory loss or their self-perceived frailty, as well as the help and care that many require, they too, in their own ways, appear to be experiencing ageing from the perspective of the 'real' old – the fourth age, as Higgs and Gilleard suggest, remains on the horizon as 'the age we have always feared' (2015: viii).

One lesson we have learned from our research is that you cannot simply ask questions or conduct studies of older (non-)users by importing themes, codes or categories from mainstream research on mobile communication – including the binary category of 'use and non-use', which assumes that once one 'adopts' a device, one will continue using

it. What happens if, at 85, you decide that you no longer need your laptop, or have no use for a mobile phone because your residence has an inexpensive landline connection? Are you no longer a user? The standard classification of users and non-users may not be appropriate for understanding the meandering trajectory of engagements with media and media technologies throughout one's life course. What is important is to create accounts that grapple with the complexity of the personal histories of engagements of how the older-old engage with mobile devices and any other ICT at particular moments of life. This attentiveness to these narratives allows for researchers to respect the richness of the information provided by the participants in the study. And while this is of most relevance in older ages, it is a valid approach at any age stage.

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