Poetics 52 (2015) 44–63

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Poetics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/poetic

Does the wind of change blow in late adulthood? Adoption of ICT by senior citizens during the past decade

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 10 December 2014
Received in revised form 16 June 2015
Accepted 19 June 2015
Available online 29 July 2015

Keywords:
Digital divide
Senior population
Capital-enhancing internet use
Repeated cross-sectional study
Ethnicity

ABSTRACT

Using data from large scale Annual Social Surveys of the CBS in Israel, the current research focused on trends of internet adoption and digital uses among the senior population in the past decade (2003–2012). The research goal was to identify the socio-demographic characteristics predicting internet access and digital uses and to examine whether the effects of these factors changed over time. During the decade the rate of internet access and digital uses increased continuously among the senior population, however the gap between them and the younger (20–64) age group was not eliminated; in fact it increased but only slightly. Our findings make it possible to identify disadvantaged groups in which being a senior intersects with additional risk factors: Arabs, immigrants, religious people, respondents from low socio-economic background and people with health problems. These findings are important for policy makers who attempt to promote internet use among Israeli older adults. Focusing on disadvantaged groups and implementing our specific recommendations may have beneficial effects.

1. Introduction

The dramatic rise in internet connectivity and usage in the past decade has opened new avenues for obtaining information, creating economic and social exchanges and engaging in social activities more

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2015.06.002
0304-422X/

easily. The down side of this digital proliferation has been a digital divide between those who have access to information and communication technologies and the ability utilize them, and those who do not (Compaine, 2001).

The shift in terminology from "digital divide" (implying a binary vision of digitalization processes) to terms such as "digital inclusion/exclusion", "digital inequality" (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001; Hargittai, 2003) and "e-inclusion/exclusion" (Riga Ministerial Declaration, 2006) reflects the change of perspective. The digital divide is not merely a technological problem; it is also a social problem with the potential for creating societal inequalities (Fuchs, 2009, Guerrieri & Bentivegna, 2011). The ability to use such technologies can determine an individual's marginality or social inclusion. Those who are excluded from communication and information structures are also effectively excluded from political and cultural citizenship (Lash, 1994).

Access to technology and its benefits is not equally distributed between or within nations (Guerrieri & Bentivegna, 2011), and in all Western countries, and indeed, the world, older people tend to be on the 'wrong' side of the digital divide (Brenner & Smith, 2013; Olphert & Damodaran, 2013; Smith, 2014; Zickuhr, 2013). The age gap among internet users appears to be changing more slowly than other aspects of the digital divide (Guerrieri & Bentivegna, 2011; Klotz, 2004). Moreover, citizens older than 60 can be identified as the social group with the lowest level of participation in the information society (Fuglsang, 2005). In the UK in 2007, "90% of those in the 16–24 age group had accessed the internet in the three months prior to the survey, whereas only 24% of those aged 65 and over had" (National Statistics UK, 2007). The European Digital Development Index (EDDI) value for the 65–74 years age bracket is constantly below the European average and shows no sign of improvement (Guerrieri & Bentivegna, 2011). In the US, while internet adoption rates among seniors are steadily increasing, they are still well below the national average (59% of seniors used internet in 2012, compared to 81% among all adults aged 18+) (Smith, 2014).

However, Abbey and Hyde (2009) note that despite the dominant trend in the research literature to perceive age as a powerful basis for the digital divide, some commentators predict that with time this divide will repair itself. While this may be correct, in our view it is important not to wait for the problem to cure itself. Rather a deeper understanding is necessary of how the newly retired have adopted new technologies in recent years. The average age of retirement in Israel is 65; considering the substantial increases in life expectancies, a 65-year-old person today may expect to live an additional 18.6 years (Greenberg, 2009) and it is important to ensure quality of life for the aging population, which in our time is inextricably linked with internet adoption and use (Shapira, Barak, & Gal, 2007).

The main purpose of the current study is to follow the trends in ICT adoption among the Israeli population aged 65 and older during the decade 2003–2012 and to identify variations in the socio-demographic characteristics that predict internet access and digital uses over time.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Digital uses

Today, it is customary to separate the digital divide into two levels of inequality: the first distinguishes between those who are connected and those who are not. The second pertains to the surfing patterns used by those connected to the internet, including measurements of different types of internet uses (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001; Hargittai, 2003). In recent years, the digital divide has increasingly been framed as a skill divide (e.g., Hargittai, 2010; Robinson, DiMaggio, & Hargittai, 2003; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2011; Van Dijk, 2005). Van Deursen, Courtois, and Van Dijk (2014) conceptualized the process of acquiring internet skills as gradual, starting with operational and formal skills that evolve into more established information and communication skills and reach completion when users attain strategic skills.

In the current research we investigate patterns of digital uses, which are obviously impacted by digital skills, but do not fully correspond to them. Different patterns of internet use, which are impacted by digital skills, among other factors, influence the life chances of users: the more capital they can accumulate using the internet, the more they can benefit from web use (Zillien & Hargittai, 2009).

Some internet usage activities are more beneficial or advantageous for users – offering them greater opportunities and resources for advancing their careers, work, education and social status