Using Internet technologies in rural communities to access services: The views of older people and service providers

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ABSTRACT

Older people in rural communities increasingly rely on the Internet to access essential health, finance, education, and other social services. However, their abilities to participate in the online service system are often undermined by a continuing 'digital divide'. This divide may be exacerbated by the strategies of service providers who fail to recognise and respond to the needs of older rural clients. This paper is based on a case study in Clare, a small rural town in South Australia, and examines the experiences of older residents and local service providers in trying to engage online for digital service delivery. Drawing on two sets of in-depth interviews, the study uses a mix of thematic content analysis and social network analysis to identify the nature and extent of digital interactions between older people and service providers, and the enablers and challenges for online service engagement. Older participants demonstrated considerable interest in learning how to use the Internet for accessing particular services, with social support networks and third party facilitators being crucial enablers. Service providers' ambitions to engage with older people online appeared more limited as a result of entrenched stereotypes of older non-users, a lack of internal digital skills, as well as organisational and funding constraints. The case study findings emphasise the importance of balancing the views of older people and service providers in the design of online engagement strategies. These insights are critical for improving online service delivery in rural communities affected by an increasing withdrawal of physical services.

1. Introduction

Older people are increasingly expected to use online technologies to access important services — including health, finance, education, administration and other social and community services. This is a particular challenge in rural communities which are confronted with both a growing ageing population and the continuing centralisation of services in urban areas (Winterton et al., 2014; Hale et al., 2010). Despite substantial research suggesting that online technologies have the potential to improve service delivery and social wellbeing in rural areas, there are still concerns that older people have limited abilities to access and use the Internet, and therefore miss out on the benefits of online services (Newman et al., 2010; Warburton et al., 2014). Such inequalities in Internet usage are commonly described as a 'digital divide', suggesting that people with certain demographic and socio-economic characteristics may be more disadvantaged in accessing and using the Internet than others (Cresci and Jarosz, 2010; Townsend et al., 2013). Reasons for a digital divide affecting older people in rural areas are diverse and include limited access to the Internet and to digital technology in rural areas, limited Internet proficiency among older people resulting from lower education and socio-economic backgrounds, as well as differing experiences and preferences in terms of how to use the Internet (Townsend et al., 2013; Newman et al., 2012; Stern et al., 2011). In addition, service providers themselves may face a range of constraints in tailoring their online strategies to the

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particular information and service delivery needs of older rural clients, thus exacerbating the digital divide experienced by this group (Warburton et al., 2014). Improving online service delivery therefore requires a better understanding of how both groups — service providers and older rural service users perceive their participation and interaction in the online service system, and what challenges they face in this process.

This paper explores the digital interactions between older people and organisations providing essential public and community services through a qualitative case study in Clare, a small town in rural South Australia. The research compares the experiences of older people using the Internet for service access with those of service providers seeking to engage with older people online. This comparison reveals the enablers and challenges for online service provision as perceived by both groups, and identifies mismatches between service provider strategies and user behaviour of older people. The paper further proposes a new way of analysing digital service engagement of older people in rural areas by conducting a social network analysis (SNA) that maps out the complex system of Internet mediated interactions between service providers and older service users. This approach is useful to visualise the extent and type of interactions with particular service providers, and to identify apparent engagement weaknesses within the service system. The combined interview and SNA results contribute to a better understanding of the complex mechanisms of digital engagement of older people in rural communities, and the different barriers older people encounter when trying to engage online.

2. Background

2.1. Digital participation of older people and challenges for online service delivery

The barriers of older people engaging in digital participation have been a prominent topic of discussion within recent debates around the 'digital divide', and the disparities in Internet usage among different social, economic and demographic groups (Cresci and Jarosz, 2010; van Deursen and Helsper, 2015). Older age, along with lower education and income levels, are repeatedly identified as factors that negatively affect Internet usage in a number of developed countries (Calvert et al., 2009; Cresci et al., 2010; Hale et al., 2010). Some groups appear more excluded from using Internet technologies than others, with recent studies suggesting that older women are less likely than older men to use the Internet, 'older' old people (e.g. 75 + years) less likely than 'younger' old people (60–75 years), people living alone less likely than those living with their spouses or families, and people with a disability less likely than those without (Berner et al., 2015; Calvert et al., 2009; Cresci et al., 2010; Dane et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2011; Niehaves and Plattfaut, 2010; van Deursen and Helsper, 2015). It has also become clear that the stereotypical image of the older Internet 'non-user' is becoming increasingly out-dated as older people become more exposed to Internet technologies and training opportunities, and new generations with more advanced Internet skills continue to enter the older lifecycle stage. This has led to calls for an ongoing re-evaluation of who the 'pro-nets' versus the 'no-nets' are (Cresci et al., 2010), how different groups participate in the digital world, and what barriers keep them from doing so (van Deursen and Helsper, 2015).

Recent studies in several developed countries explored the reasons for restricted Internet use among older people in more detail (Cresci et al., 2010; Gatto and Tak, 2008; Gitlow, 2014; Lee et al., 2011; van Deursen and Helsper, 2015; Wagner et al., 2010). The most commonly identified barriers include: a lack of basic computing and Internet literacy skills; a lack of confidence in people's own ability to learn those skills; a lack of access to adequate training and learning environments which target the specific needs of older people; fear of fast-changing technologies and the need to constantly re-learn skills; a lack of regular access to computers or the Internet due to prohibitive costs; persistent concerns about online privacy and safety issues; fears about embarrassing oneself in front of others; physical constraints related to mobility, visual impairment, fine motor skills, or mental limitations; and a perceived lack of time. Also a general lack of interest in, and limited recognition of the utility of using the Internet are commonly mentioned as barriers, though it has been acknowledged that such attitudes are gradually changing, with more seniors becoming aware of the potential benefits of Internet technologies and interested in learning how to use them (Kilpeläinen and Seppänen, 2014; Goodwin, 2013). Such learning efforts can be supported by individualised training (Goodwin, 2013; Berner et al., 2015), the involvement of older people in the design of training (Selwyn, 2004), and the provision of ongoing personal mentoring and social support networks (Cresci and Jarosz, 2010; Niehaves and Plattfaut, 2010; Warburton et al., 2014).

In terms of preferred Internet activities, many studies have found that older people use the Internet primarily to communicate with friends and relatives, stay socially connected, access instant information or entertainment, or for daily routine tasks such as shopping, travel and banking (Gatto and Tak, 2008; Sum et al., 2009; Gitlow, 2014). Online engagement with public authorities or civic service providers appears to be comparatively limited (Kilpeläinen and Seppänen, 2014; van Deursen and Helsper, 2015). The extent to which this lack of online service engagement is limited to older people only is, however, not clear. Recent research by the UK telecommunications regular Ofcom for example, has shown that using local government websites and online services is generally limited among all Internet users, not just older people (Ofcom, 2015). The reasons for limited online use of services is currently not well understood, and may well differ between older and younger users. Some issues that appear to affect older people in particular are linked to more complex and sensitive information needs arising from the service context, the need for more advanced Internet skills to complete online service tasks, or simply the fact that older people are still used to (or prefer) accessing such services offline (Kilpeläinen and Seppänen, 2014). This points towards a potential functional or opportunity-related digital divide that may affect certain groups of Internet users, whereby differences in digital participation not only arise through different access, technology or skill levels, but through different preferences for using the Internet for particular tasks but not others (Newman et al., 2012; Stern et al., 2011; Wagner et al., 2010).

The digital divide affecting older people may further be narrowed or widened by the physical and social contexts of Internet use (Lee et al., 2011). Not all Internet access occurs at home on a privately owned computer by the consumer who is directly seeking the service. People may access the Internet in public settings and/or facilitated through a 'mediator' who completes Internet tasks on their behalf (Helsper, 2008). The access setting may also impact on what can be done, either as a result of the capabilities of the actual user, the capabilities of the physical setting (e.g. some public settings may not allow certain types of downloads or be secure for financial transactions), or the social context (e.g. a consumer may not wish to share sensitive information on a public computer or with the person who accesses the Internet on their behalf).

Another important concern is that a functional digital divide can form when the views of clients and service providers on how to use the Internet for service delivery differ from one another. This divide may be further exacerbated if service providers are unable to recognise and respond to the specific needs and patterns of