

When I'm Sixty Four. Towards Successful Aging in a Platform Society

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Introduction

The pandemic crisis of 2020 has emphasised the vulnerability of the older population, their isolation and the reliance on information technology—such as video communication—to ameliorate the situation. According to the United Nations, the population aged 65 and over is growing faster than all other age groups globally. This also means that the societal resources to support older people are decreasing, in financial terms as well as in terms of human resources. Information technology is increasingly seen as the solution to the equation of how to support an aging population. At the same time, there is a rapid shift towards ICT enabled processes in all sectors of society, meaning that everyday interactions increasingly call for high levels of computer literacy and proficiency.

As demographics change, the concept of “older people” is overly simplistic, and there are others better addressing emergent quality and complexity of an aging population and its heterogeneous needs (Settersten & Mayer, 1997). That said, for the sake of simplicity this position paper will stick with the generic term. However, as a heuristic device it may be relevant to at least consider three groups: employed older people, older people in early retirement and in late retirement respectively.

Macro Level Initiatives

Cerna et al. (2020) note that previous studies in CSCW related to older adults have focused on the micro level, with less research addressing the meso and/or

macro levels. Therefore, I will here point to some related macro level initiatives as well as what I perceive as a critical gap in this domain, namely the lack of involvement of the IT industry itself. First I will provide a few examples of macro level actors/initiatives from a predominately Swedish context.

- **Public Organisations**
On a national level there are a number of policy initiatives by various public actors, supporting lifelong learning as well as the introduction of IT in healthcare, social care etc. This includes authorities such as the Swedish Agency for Participation and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. In many of these cases, there is also a close collaboration with academia, and monitoring these initiatives thus provides opportunities for researchers to engage with and make impact on the macro level.
- **Non-Governmental Organisations**
One of the most important Swedish non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in this domain is SeniorNet (Furlong, 1995). SeniorNet was founded back in 1986 in the United States, an affiliated Swedish chapter was established a decade later, in 1997. Mynatt et al. (1999) saw SeniorNet as a classic case of computer supported, cooperative work due to its strong focus on learning and working together. Even though this is an NGO, it should be noted that the Swedish chapter received governmental support and also was linked to a governmental commission that formulated a national internet strategy. SeniorNet Sweden still remains an important actor with 9000 members and 45 local groups, providing a community infrastructure promoting lifelong learning among senior citizens.
- **Private Companies**
Somewhere between an NGO and a company is the incubator Aging2.0, which promotes startups focusing on the needs of older people. Similar to SeniorNet, Aging2.0 also has a Swedish chapter. There are a number of private companies that in various ways strive to promote and support older people's use of technology. One such example is Funka, which is a IT consultancy company focusing on accessibility in general (not so much on elderly in particular) and with a strong focus on research collaborations and EU projects. Other examples can be found in the field of human resources recruitment, where a number of companies are supporting workers around the age of retirement.
- **Academia**
Academic research on aging, as well as aging and work is commonplace. Adding the IT dimension makes it far less so, but there are still numerous examples, from Swedish participation at the Horizon 2020 level (i.e. *More Years, Better Lives*) down to local participatory design projects, such as HealthCloud (Normark et al., 2018). Most of these projects do however seem to be related mainly to eHealth, rather than the wider issue of successful ageing.

In summary, there is something of a quadruple helix collaboration working on the challenges related to IT and an aging population. However, to a large extent one of the most important actors is missing, and this is the topic of the next and final section.

On Clouds, Information Infrastructures and Platforms

The examples above demonstrate some of the meso-level activities. What is missing is the IT industry in general and the IT giants in particular. (Obviously this position paper is not a full fledged survey and so the omission is in part a rhetorical strategy imposed by its author.)

In recent years, the IT landscape has changed radically in the wake of cloud computing and platforms (Monterio et al., 2013). This also has an impact on the prospect of participatory design. Indeed, authors have stressed the emergence of information infrastructures and how this radically changes not only design but also the position of the researcher. Thus, Fitzpatrick & Ellingsen (2013) note that:

The size, complexity and dependencies imply that the role of the CSCW researcher is just one of many stakeholders that voice opinions in these circumstances.

This is a challenge that must be taken seriously when engaging with the current IT landscape. This is even more critical as platforms display numerous characteristics which make them difficult to manage for older users. (Something this author has noted on numerous occasions when trying to support IT appropriation by elderly people.) Thus, even a well designed application is never stronger than the whole chain of the existing information infrastructure. A simple example is a smartphone designed for elderly, with larger buttons etc. However, as soon as the user needs to engage with any of the ubiquitous apps—from the bus ticket app to the big social network—the gadget reverts to the specific design of these applications.

A lot of this falls under the heading of universal design, and universal design has been argued as an approach to supporting successful aging (Carr et al., 2013). Thus one answer to the call for new approaches to participatory design (Cerna et al., 2002) would be to explore the links between participatory design and universal design. Especially—I would argue—this could be mounted as a design critique of existing platforms, giving voice to the needs of older people, rather than developing short lived prototypes. Finally, supporting organisations such as SeniorNet, which provide nationwide infrastructures seems an important route towards strengthening older users on their own terms. Ultimately, this might lead to collaboration with the platform providers, hopefully for the benefit of all.

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