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Introduction. Aging, Communication and Media Technologies

What does it mean to age within “networked societies” (Castells, 2000)? What might be learned if we take the Internet and Communication Technology (ICT) and media experiences of older adults into account in our research? These questions are core to this special issue on *Aging, Communication and Media Technologies*. Comprised of six papers from authors working in five cultural contexts in Europe and North America, *Aging, Communication and Media Technologies* offers insights into demographic transformations towards ‘ageing societies’ in the industrialized world, changes in the media and technological landscape, and the varied practices of communication in different cultural contexts.

Aging, Communication and Media Technologies opens with a case study on the experiences of Romanian and Canadian grandmothers who use Facebook to maintain intergenerational connection. “*Grannies on the Net: Grandmothers’ Experiences of Facebook in Family Communication*” by Loredana Ivan and Shannon Hebblethwaite queries how grandmothers integrate social media into their grandparenting practices and routines. While much differs between these two national and cultural contexts, the study affirms the generative possibilities of working across national borders when considering aging, identity and communication technologies and practices¹.

Andrea Rosales and Mireia Fernández-Ardèvol’s paper, “*Beyond WhatsApp: Older People and Smartphones*”, concentrates on two very different data sets on the use of smart phones and smart phone apps by older adults living in Spain. Quantitative log data obtained by tracking smartphone users from 20-76 years of age is compared to qualitative results captured in focus groups with users between 55-81 years of age. As a month-long collection of log data indicates, on a daily basis, Whats App is the most frequently used applications by all age groups. Older adults have a propensity to use more Personal Information Management apps such as notes, calendars, reminders, as well as weather applications than do younger cohorts of users. Older users revert to mobile (or cellular) networks to access data when they are away from their homes for short periods of time; younger users have the tendency to access free WiFi networks whenever possible. Like other papers in this special issue, they present their findings in a detailed and nuanced manner, affirm the value of combining methods and compare the frequency of use of older users to younger users without judgmentally assessing these differences, so that older users never quite measure up to their younger counterparts.

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¹ There is a relatively low percentage of Romanian people aged 65 and over using the internet (6%), compared to higher rates in Canada (48%) (Blanche, 2015).

Movement, mobility and the use of ICTs within and between private and public realms is a theme that is picked up in Barbara Ratzenböck's innovative study “*“Let’s Take a Look Together”: Walking Interviews in Domestic Spaces as a Means to Examine ICT Experiences of Women 60+ ”*”. Ratzenböck takes the home as her research location to delve into the significance of ICTs for older women through storytelling and walking. What is said about ICTs in a seated interview does not always match what is said about ICTs when a guided tour of domestic space is given, as Ratzenböck discovers. This “micro-ethnography” demonstrates how devices scattered throughout the home may stimulate memories and augment, minimize or contradict statements made during an interview. Innovative methodologies, such as the domestic walking interview, engage older participants in storytelling about the changes in media and communication that they have observed over time. This process affirms their experiences, as subjects aging *with* media, as valid.

The articles in *Aging, Communication and Media Technologies* address the nexus between ageism and media technologies and the ways that it may inadvertently color our research. Coined by Robert N. Butler in 1968, ageism puts a name to “the widespread bigotry faced by older persons” (Katz, 2009, p. 13). Ageism can be embedded in the frameworks or protocols developed within disciplines. For example, the Canadian Wireless and Telecommunications Industry defines the “older user” as 50+. Data is then collected on a large undifferentiated, unquestioned statistical cohort (Sawchuk & Crow, 2011). These imprecisions and lack of attention to differences within this statistical cohort can obscure or ignore the rich experiences of the very old who have a long history with epochs and eras of media and communication technologies as well as knowledge of social practices of communication that may be ever more valuable to consider, such as conversation (Turkle, 2012).

Ageism also can be present in media representations of ageing. In “*The Grey Digital Divide in the Workplace: Matters of Age or of Language that Divides?*” Martine Lagacé, Houssein Charmarkeh, Radamis Zaky and Najat Firzly argue that ageist attitudes and perceptions are central to the existence and perpetuation of a “grey digital divide.” As they write, ageist perspectives often depict the elderly as less attractive, more forgetful, more rigid in thought, less motivated and less dynamic than their younger counterparts. These are negative stereotypes. On the other hand, older adults also are depicted as warm, caring and kindly. These are positive stereotypes. Both stereotypes, they explain, can fuel a self-fulfilling prophecy when it comes to digital learning. As they postulate, ageism is one of the driving forces driving forces behind this divide because these notions may be internalized and stand in the way of providing training.

The effect of representations on real world issues is echoed in Patrik Marier and Isabelle Van Pevenage’s “*The Invisible Women: Gender and Caregiving in Francophone Newspapers.*” As industrialised countries experience population aging, international organizations and governments are transforming, and often shrinking, the services provided by the welfare state (OECD, 1999, 2000). The expansion of an aging population and contraction of services has gendered consequences because most caregivers in these societies are female (Lavoie et al., 2014). As Marier and Van Pevenage’s study of articles discussing care work in five countries documents, the role played by women in this scenario rarely is mentioned. Marier and Van Pevenage’s study of agenda setting in the media asks us to consider how the absence of women’s role in the caregiving to older adults may impact government policies for providing support and relief to them and to their families.

In the last paper included in this special issue, “*Humor, Loneliness and Interpersonal Communication: a Quantitative Study of Romanian Older Adults*”, Ioana Schiau presents a fascinating analysis of how older Romanians use humor to address loneliness. Schiau uses psychological assessment scales to gauge feelings of loneliness and social isolation in carefully segmented generational cohorts. It is a reminder of the import, for communication scholars to consider how language operates as a mediating force and the need for remembering the role of interpersonal connection, and face-to-face communication, within digitally networked societies.

Ageing is vital process to study and the experiences of older adults in our society, who engage or disengage with ICTs, is a topic of growing concern. As these articles indicate, one must be wary of making over-generalized statements when so much more research is needed on this topic. Ageing and the use of ICTs is modulated by many contingencies including cultural context, the gender of subjects, their socio-economic circumstances, personal histories of engagement with ICTs, general literacy and education and the kinds of infrastructures that are in place in a region. As a whole, the pieces do not assume age and ageing only presents problems for us to solve or redress. These papers collectively illuminate the subtle interpersonal and mediated relationships that older adults have with others and with their devices. They help us to understand the subtle ways that *ageist assumptions* (Gullette, 2004; Cruikshank, 2003) may influence a research agenda and data analysis, produce an unwarranted fear of the processes of ageing and the elderly, or offer a partial view of the diversified experiences of ageing across nations, genders, classes and languages.

As this research suggests, the goal of research on age, ageing and technology is to generate appropriate methods for understanding the experiences of older adults. Interrogating ageing and communication through a rigorous multi-methodological analysis of the *actual* practices of older individuals within the complexities of the contemporary digital media world is essential. These essays and this issue make a contribution to this collective intellectual effort.

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