The Digital Lives of Older Irish People: Contexts and Methods of Enquiry

Adrian Smyth

Introduction

Ireland is experiencing significant increases in the numbers of older people as a proportion of the general population. In the last five years, the percentage of those above the age of sixty-five has risen by around nineteen per cent and currently stands at just over 637,000 (CSO, 2017), the various reasons for which align with global commonalities such as improving healthcare, decreases in fertility rates, and general improvements in standards of living (UN, 2015). Looking ahead, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) projects the numbers of those aged over sixty-five in Ireland will rise to just over 887,000 in 2027.

This current study is a response to this demographic phenomenon, but within a rapidly technologising society. Specifically, the focus here is on how the 'flow' of the daily lives of older people may be impacted by their engagements – or indeed disengagements – with the most prevalent of contemporary personal digital paradigms: mobile phones, computers/tablets/the internet, and digital television services. The aim here is to elicit, by way of the diary method and one-to-one interviews, direct evidence from a group of older people and so provide a 'snapshot' of their digital 'worlds'; some are seen to conform to common assumptions about how older people may be said to 'struggle' with new technologies; others will reveal practices of more active 'agency', especially in terms of 'resisting' the 'allure' of digital worlds, particularly when articulated through practices of social comparison.

In terms of what we currently know about the digital lives of older people, some useful quantitative indicators emerge from the Information Society Statistics Households 2017 survey by the CSO. Here, *non*-use of the internet by those in the sixty to seventy-four age group is shown to have dropped by seven percent between 2012 and 2017 (CSO, 2017). Within this five-year band, however – and with the exception of 2016 where there was some narrowing of the gap between age groups –

there has been no significant convergence with the preceding age cohort (45–59) over the same period, with separation between the two groups remaining at an average of around thirty percent (CSO, 2017). Concerns that such digital separations do not narrow over time may indicate a stubborn 'digital divide' (Gunkel, 2003) – the suggestion there may be deleterious socio-economic and cultural consequences resulting from disparities between those who engage with digital 'worlds' and those who do not.

New technologies and older people: assumptions and barriers

While the responsible assessment of older people and their relationships to technologies is that they must be regarded as heterogeneous a societal group as any other, a stubborn and prevalent assumption nevertheless pertains that older people 'struggle' when it comes to digital/technological engagements, especially in terms of the operation of devices; and viewed from a purely chronological perspective, there may appear to be some logic here. Digital technologies have, after all, arrived comparatively late in the life-spans of older people, especially for those aged over eighty. So lives lived largely outside the frame of technology's more contemporary and accelerating 'evolutions' may be particularly notable for deficiencies in the relevant and more 'native' technical competences which may otherwise allow more active participation. While reiterating the caveat against accepting prevailing assumptions about older people and technologies, there are nevertheless some common themes in the literature when it comes to understanding any 'barriers' older people may encounter in this regard.

The Independent Age (UK)/Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation report, *Older People, Technology and Community: the Potential of Technology to Help Older People Renew or Develop Social Contacts and to Actively Engage in their Communities* (2012), has identified a number of barriers including a perception amongst older people themselves that new technologies are either costly or simply not relevant to their lives. This is in part due to a lack of awareness of what technologies can offer to their lives; also, unlike younger groups, there is not an automatic assumption that technologies are necessarily good things per se. Other considerations include inappropriate or inadequate marketing of technologies to older people, inappropriate

technology design, such as inaccessible controls or complicated interfaces, and anxieties over online security.

These barriers are also evident in The GO Digital Trial, commissioned by the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport in 2012, which sought to determine levels of preparedness for a switchover from analogue to digital radio services. While pre-trial knowledge of digital radio technology varied across households, the research concluded that there was a general lack of awareness about a potential switchover, especially amongst those aged over sixty-five. In terms of the installation and usability of digital radio equipment, the research found that older people were more likely to struggle with the setting up of digital radios. However, once older people were introduced to digital radio sets, the technology was, to a degree, 'demystified', and they were then more disposed to using it. Other barriers were identified, such as inertia due to the lack of perceived need for the new technology and lack of awareness and confidence around new technologies in general, the cost of purchasing new equipment, and the notion of sentimental attachment to old radio sets (Ipsos MediaCT, 2013).

Shifting the question from one of access to actual use of technologies, van Deursen (2012) found that comparative operational dexterity and content awareness in internet use amongst younger and older individuals revealed that higher age contributed negatively to levels of more basic medium/operational technical skills. In part, at least, this was due to inevitable reductions in physical mobility that comes with age. However, he also concludes that, whilst younger people perform better in the operational sphere, they showed strikingly low levels of discernment when it came to assessing online content. Regrettably, though, he found that it can often be older people themselves who may unwittingly contribute to negative assumptions about their abilities when questioned *just* about their abilities to operate technological devices. This warns against the dangers of accepting assessments of operational difficulties alone as explainers of digital/technological disengagement as they may not provide the full picture (van Deursen, 2012). Additionally, Lee, Chen, and Hewitt (2011) find that constraints to digital participation amongst older people may be many and varied and relate also to socio-cultural factors, such as a poor level of education, low annual

income, or a solitary living arrangement, any of which may inform digital dis/engagement.

Clearly, attempts to understand the motivations of older people to comprehend and use technologies should be extended to both users *and* non-users alike, such as around practices of resistance, conscious (active), or sub-conscious (passive). This is a consideration in this current study, especially as a counterbalance to any pressures from concepts typified by the 'silver surfer' discourse, which aims to celebrate older digital technology users, but which may also serve to perpetuate the notion that *all* older adults stand to benefit from greater access to and use of contemporary digital technologies (Nimrod, 2009). This may not necessarily be a safe assumption, especially if, as has been suggested by Hagberg (2012), late-life prioritisations may simply not rate such activities as important in the overall scheme of daily life.

Nevertheless, when it comes to media consumption, it is the notion of 'routine', that remains a major determinant, especially for the older generation for whom routinely-situated habits are most tied in with domestic routine. While media may change their configurations, such as from digital desktop computers to tablets, 'what matters most...are transformations of habit' (Couldry et al., 2010, 191). It is precisely at the intersection of technological intervention and older lives, with any ensuing consequences for the transformations of the daily life 'flow', that this current study is most concerned.

Considerations of ageing in this study

While it may be argued that, in the social context, the delineation of certain age boundaries may be viewed as mere arbitrary exercises, such as the equivalence of a working life with economic contribution – and so the obverse – there are physiological considerations that must be faced by most people beyond a certain age. Although there may be tensions between attempts to scientifically categorise life stages against those of social policies (Krampe, et al., 2007), Ian Stuart-Hamilton (2012) draws a line in asserting that 'in the majority of people there are significant (if not dramatic) changes in mental and physical functioning that mean[s]…sixty to sixty-five is a reasonable choice of age of onset or threshold age and is the one used by most modern gerontologists' (Stuart-Hamilton, 2012, 17). There appears to be further consensus

that 'the cognitive mechanics (reaction time, speed of memory search, reasoning speed, motor speed and precision) undergo systematic age-related declines from young to late adulthood' (Baltes et al., 1999b; Li et al., 2004; Rabbitt, 1993a; Rabbitt et al., 2004, cited in Krampe et al., 2007, 256). At the neural level, systematic age-related declines may be explained by a reduction in plasticity of the brain to convert cortical representations into functional experience. At the behavioural level, 'plasticity denotes the (reserve) capacity to extend the behavioural repertoire by acquiring new skills or behaviours through experience or practice' (Baltes and Singer, 2001; Buonomano and Merzenich, 1998; Singer, 1995, cited in Krampe et al., 2007, 260).

There is a specific assertion here that if engaged in, say, computer training, older adults may be less likely to benefit from performance-enhancing training programmes and may need more cognitive support; they may comply less with instructions, and apply the methods of training correctly less often (Baltes and Baltes, 1997; Campl, 1998; Verhaegen and Marcoen, 1996; Verhaegen et al., 1992, cited in Krampe et al., 2007). This also implies that reductions in cognitive plasticity may be even more pronounced in those aged over eighty and that any such instruction above this *may* be negated, not only by reduced cognitive plasticity, but by historical social biographies, such as limited educational background. While these are interesting and important considerations when it comes to understanding the digital worlds of older people, and how they move within them, there is room for a more targeted and specialist study which goes beyond the scope of this current research.

Methodologies and methods in this study

This study's primary concern is to capture, as accurately as possible, a snapshot of the daily digital 'realities' of the cohort within the contexts of their personal situations by way of the chosen methods of data collection: the self-completed diary and the one-to-one interview. Despite the small size of the sample groups – around fifteen people in urban and rural settings – it is hoped that, through judicious and purposive sampling, the profiles of the participants will approximate to a fair representation of the wider target demographic.

The diary method: The nature of this study, dipping as it does into the personal histories of those with comparatively long life-spans, makes it particularly suited to the use of storytelling as a means of capturing data. In this regard, the diary method is one that fits the purpose, allowing as it does the opportunity to explore individual lives from the participants' point of view in what might be a broadly naturalistic tone. The field phase of the study will be underpinned by the key questions: what challenges and opportunities are older people encountering in their daily use of digital technologies, and how may their use, or indeed non-use, of such technologies impact the flow of their daily lives.

While the practice of diary-keeping is perhaps one that has fallen out of favour in recent generations, there may be some remembrances amongst the participant cohort of the activity as a familiar practice. However, in deference to what may be long-established daily life patterns, it is recognised that the daily keeping of such a record may, in some circumstances, be an onerous or even disruptive task. Consequently, it is the intention of the researcher to manage the method in such a way that the capabilities of participants are considered throughout the process. For instance, if the practice is proving troublesome, then there are alternative methods of data recording which may be deployed, such as audio recordings or scheduled telephone interviews. In any event, a period of no more than fourteen days of diary-keeping is considered sufficient here to observe settled patterns of daily behaviour.

Ultimately, the diary method promises to provide privileged access to the private digital worlds of older people, their activities within those worlds, and accounts of their mechanical operations. It promises further access to any tactical or strategic thoughts and practices, and personal reflections on their interactions with digital processes, especially in terms of how they may, or indeed may not, be adapting their lives to fit these relatively new 'worlds'. But more than just the promise of the record of a series of actual events, the diary exercise may be viewed rather as a 'proxy' exercise which may then allow, in the follow-up interview, for deeper explorations of the data recorded. This certainly chimes with the idea of diary-keeping in social research as a means of *revealing* the social processes and rationalities which may contribute to an individual's decisions and actions (Alaszewski, 2006, 48). So the traditional notion of the diary, as a trigger for personal reflection, serves as an invitation

to the participant to dwell more than usual upon what may have previously been regarded as mundane daily tasks.

The interview: The one-to-one interview is particularly suitable as a research methodology 'when the researcher needs to gain insights into things such as people's opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences…' (Denscombe, 2010, 173). This recognises that face-to-face interviews should be both structured and semi-structured in nature; some initial structure is necessary, in order to assist the interviewee along a specific path of enquiry, but the developing encounter should become a little less structured, which allows the interviewee to elaborate, at their own pace, and to pursue trains of thought (175). It is possible this mixed method of interviewing techniques may be separated over time between successive encounters, perhaps starting with the structured method on the first encounter and progressing to a less structured tone over time as rapport is developed between researcher and participant.

Conclusion

There are unequivocal and hitherto unprecedented shifts occurring in the age profile of the population in Ireland. Whilst forward population estimates, as predictions, must always bear some caveats, it is perhaps wise not become too fixated with the weight of numbers, but rather also to dwell upon the *quality* of future lives, especially those which may be caught in technological processes which in any event appear to be assuming more structural and centralised roles in cementing social stability. The physiological realities of ageing processes for individuals, fleetingly mentioned here, are an inescapable consideration when it comes to junctions of the human and the technological. It is hoped that this study will go some way to explaining how a small sample of older people are managing or are being transformed by their digital worlds. Above all, this is an opportunity to hear directly from a generation born into the mechanical age and to understand how they may be adjusting to the demands of the digital age. This does not only serve as an end in itself, but rather as a predictor of how the conundrum of relentlessly evolving technological spheres can ever be reconciled with those of increasingly long-living – and variable – but ultimately diminishing human forms.

Works cited

Alaszewski, A. (2006), *Using Diaries for Social Research*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Central Statistics Office (2017), 'Information Society Statistics – Households 2017', available at: http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/isshh/informationsocietystatistics-households2017/

Couldry, N., S. Livingstone and T. Markham (2010), *Media Consumption and Public Engagement: Beyond the Presumption of Attention*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Denscombe, M. (2010), *The Good Research Guide for Small Scale Research Projects* (4th ed.), Buckingham: Open University Press.

Gunkel, D. (2003), 'Second Thoughts: Toward a Critique of the Digital Divide', *New Media and Society* 5:4, pp. 499–522, London: Sage Publications, available at: http://gunkelweb.com/articles/digital_divide.pdf.

Hagberg, J.-E. (2012), 'Being the Oldest in a Shifting Technology Landscape' in Loos, E, L. Haddon and E. Mante-Meijer (eds.), *Generational Use of New Media*, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, pp. 89–103.

Independent Age (UK), Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (2012), *Older people, technology and community: the potential of technology to help older people renew or develop social contacts and to active engage in their communities*, London, available at: https://www.cisco.com/c/dam/en_us/about/ac79/docs/wp/ps/Report.pdf.

Ipsos MediaCT (2013), 'Go Digital Trial: Measuring the impact of radio switchover on consumers', available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/206694/130607_-Go_Digital_Report__Final.docx_1_.pdf

Krampe, R.T. and L. McInnes (2007), 'Competence and Cognition', in J. Bond, S. Peace, F. Dittman-Kohli and G. J. Westerhof (eds.) *Ageing in Society, European Perspectives on Gerontology* (3rd ed.), London: Sage Publications Ltd, pp. 255–267.

Lee, B., C. Yiewi and L. Hewitt (2011), 'Age differences in constraints encountered by seniors in their use of computers and the internet', in R. D. Tennyson, P. Kirschner and J.-H. Wu (eds.) (2011), *Computers in Human Behavior*, Elsevier, available at: http://researchgate.net/profile/Lynne_Hewitt/publication/220495652_Age_differences_in_constraints_encountered_by_seniors_in_their_use_of_the_internet/links/0f317530f637e07ffa000000.pdf

Nimrod, G. (2009), 'Seniors' Online Communities: A Quantitative Content Analysis', *The Gerontologist* 50: 3, pp. 382–392, available at: http://www.academia.edu/1436309/Seniors_online_communities_A_quantitative_content_analysis

Stuart-Hamilton, I. (2012), *The Psychology of Ageing, an Introduction*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

United Nations (2015), *World Population Ageing 2015*, New York: United Nations, available at: http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WPA2015_Report.pdf

Van Deursen, A. (2012), 'Age and Internet Skills: Rethinking the Obvious' in E. Loos, L. Haddon and E. Mante-Meijer (eds.), *Generational Use of New Media*, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, pp. 171–182.