# Appropriation of social networking by older people: two case studies

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**Abstract.** At the 'Fostering social interactions in a the Ageing Society' workshop, we can contribute findings from two in-depth longitudinal studies of older people making use of social networking sites, specifically YouTube and digital photography sites. We use these studies to challenge traditional approaches to thinking about technology for older people and models of accessibility to suggest appropriation as a more useful lens.

## Introduction

With populations ageing across the developed world (UN, 2007) attention has recently turned to ways of maintaining a good quality of life for those experiencing an extended old age in those countries (WHO, 2002). Technology is often seen as the critical enabler for being able to deal with the challenges of an aging population, especially around issues of managing chronic illnesses associated with older people and in supporting 'aging in place' agendas where people are cared for in their own homes. Notions such as telecare, assistive technology, ambient assisted living are becoming increasingly common in both research and commercial contexts. While we do not underestimate the importance of being able to provide such care, we are specifically concerned with how these approaches implicitly inscribe aging as a process of physiological decline and older people as health problems to be solved.

Older people are people too and the experience of growing older in many developed societies is unfortunately also tainted by increasing levels of social isolation and reduced community involvement, with family and friends often living far away and older people choosing to live alone. Social isolation can negatively impact on emotional well being when experienced as loneliness, increasing an older person's susceptibility to depression (Choi and McDougall, 2006) as well as being linked to all causes of mortality and morbidity (e.g. House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). Physical debility and reduced motivation as a result of depression can further compound the sense of social isolation and loneliness that older people experience.

The question that we have been concerned with is how can we address not only people's health needs at home but also their social needs, making use of the same infrastructure, e.g., where a webcam and/or internet connection can be used not only for remote consultation with a care giver but also for social interaction with family friends.

Again however, current approaches to inclusive web design for older people tend to build upon 'deficit-driven' models of ageing which emphasise the physical, cognitive and social decline associated with advanced age. Whilst such approaches are necessary in relation to certain forms of age-related disability they tend to ignore the role of individual motivations and the effects of social context when making sense of older people's engagement with web-based social media. A consequence of this is a rather limited view of the person-technology dynamic which emphasises the establishment of generic functionality rather than understanding individual motivations for using social media as a positive adaptation to ageing in the context of people's everyday lives.

Through the recent thesis work of the first author in particular, we have explored using an alternative lens of appropriation to develop a broader notion of the person-technology dynamic in relation to older people which can accommodate such positive and idiosyncratic adaptations. Appropriation describes the mundane psycho-socio-technical process which underpins the ongoing negotiations between a person and their technology with regards to defining its (evolving) purpose and meaning through ongoing adaptation, personalisation and reinterpretation. We use the notion of appropriation to expose the underlying subjective and socially embedded nature of older people's engagement with social media and show how motivated individuals establish the relevance, benefits and meaning of such technologies as part of their everyday experience of ageing.

# The Case Studies

At this workshop we can discuss two longitudinal case studies of older users using different social networking systems (SNS) and how they found meaning and value in using the SNS as part of their appropriation over time. Both studies were conducted over a period of years and involved a mix of methods including participant observations, contextual interviews and analyses of online behaviour.

## YouTube and Geriatric1927

The first case study focuses on a widower in his 80s, Peter, using the video-sharing website YouTube. Peter lives independently in his own home in a semi-rural area in the north of England. Despite some mobility problems due to arthritis he gets around to local shops, family and friends using public transport and an electric mobility vehicle. Some years prior to becoming involved with YouTube he had acted as sole carer for his wife and after her death had decided it would be a good idea to start making use of computers and the Internet as a new source of social contact so that he would feel less lonely and isolated. He started to learn about computers by taking courses at his local college and building his own computer with his son.

In August 2006 at the age of 79 he decided to embark upon a *video blogging* experiment by posting videos onto the YouTube website under the pseudonym of 'Geriatric1927'. This YouTube involvement was to reframe his use of computers and the Internet, revealing a new sense of relevance beyond his earlier concerns and in relation to a new online social context. We have been studying Peter's use of YouTube, with his knowledge and involvement, since that time.

Almost immediately after posting his first video Peter started to attract a lot of attention with his 'channel' becoming incredibly popular, soon appearing on the YouTube home page as a highly-viewed contributor. Since that time he has posted a total of 294 videos to YouTube on different themes and his 'channel' has been visited 2,737,456 times with 55,378 of these visitors signing up as dedicated subscribers to his videos (at 27th April 2011). In a previous study (Harley and Fitzpatrick, 2009a) the content of Peter's first eight videos and their related responses was analysed to see how his engagement with the YouTube developed during this early encounter.

Peter has made many friendly contacts throughout the YouTube community during his time there. His YouTube community related videos have become a more significant element of his ongoing appropriation of YouTube and he will often continue his contact with friendly YouTubers between videos using email and Skype video.

One characteristic of his YouTube community videos is their conversational style: the sense you get when watching them that you are being invited by Peter to

join in a conversation, i.e. to take part as a participant rather than just as a viewer. This is of course what makes YouTube a living community rather than just a collection of online videos. A closer look at one of these videos shows how the multimodal aspects of YouTube are used to create this conversational sense (for a more in depth analysis of this multimodal video dialogue and its implications for computer-mediated communication see Harley and Fitzpatrick, 2009b).

In terms of appropriation these conversational subtleties are an important aspect of realising the social potential of YouTube and of creating the sense of intimacy intrinsic to an older person's communicative needs (e.g. Carstensen, 1992).

## YouTube and Geriatric1927

The focus of our second case study is a 70 year old woman called Shirley who lives with her husband in a small town on the south coast of England and her use of the digital photo sharing and merchandising websites, RedBubble and Zazzle.

Shirley and her husband live in a housing scheme tailored specifically for retirees where support for daily living is available when requested although they do not currently make use of such support. Shirley has good health and mobility but is often kept at home through her commitments as a full time carer for her husband who suffers with longstanding mental health problems. Shirley bought her first computer in 2005 at the age of 64 and cites a number of different reasons for wanting to get one.

Like Peter, Shirley started out doing computer courses at her local college but soon found that she could not transfer the knowledge easily and started her own trial and error investigations. She began learning to use email to keep in contact with friends and family in the UK. She had also 'adopted'[1] some orphaned children some years earlier as part of her involvement with a church organization (six children in Nepal and another three in Ghana). Not having any children of her own meant that they had become very important to her. She started to have regular ongoing contact with them by email. As Shirley became more adept at using the computer this intergenerational connection was to provide an important background to her subsequent appropriation of SNS, along with her creativity.

After about a year of learning how to use the computer she decided to try pursuing her longstanding interest in photography using her computer. In addition the commercial potential of her photography became obvious to her once online and she thought that this would give her an opportunity to make some money for her adopted children. She quickly learnt that her old style photos taken with a normal camera would be rejected because the quality of the image was not good enough to be sold online and decided to buy a digital camera instead. Shirley's initial use of computers and the Internet was therefore driven by an ongoing

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[1] By this Shirley meant that she financially supported them

charitable motive in relation to her adopted children. Her wish to support them financially led her to learning more about digital image processing techniques on her computer using image editing programs like PhotoImpact, Paint Shop Pro, and ArcSoft Photo Studio.

Initially Shirley decided to submit her work to a number of photographic stock libraries (including Fotolia) but became frustrated that she had little control over the process. She joined a forum attached to one of these stock libraries but found this very critical and quite unfriendly. Whilst taking part in the forum however another contributor voiced her own dissatisfaction with the site and suggested that everyone should follow her to a website called Redbubble. Thanks to this forum exchange Shirley discovered the photography merchandising website Redbubble[2] which would provide her with the means of turning her photography into saleable products like t-shirts and greetings cards whilst also giving her access to a friendly creative community via its social networking facilities.

Redbubble turned out to be a social place where she could meet other artists and learn new skills, getting constructive feedback on her work at the same time. Through this involvement she learnt a whole new set of literacies in relation to tailoring her photography to particular products which could be bought through RedBubble.

Over time though, Shirley found that the social involvement in Redbubble became too much for her, to the detriment of her commercial productivity (and charitable motives). She had amassed a great number of fans on the site who she felt compelled to give feedback to with regards to their own creative input to the site. She was finding it increasingly difficult to live up to her 'feeling of loyalty' towards them and decided to delete her Redbubble account as a way of managing this. At the same time as she closed this account she opened another with Zazzle[3], another photographic merchandising website which she had heard about from a friend on Redbubble which has a greater emphasis on commercial productivity and a wider range of products.

Shirley's use of her computer was framed by a passion for photography but also by a wish to do something that would benefit others.

## Summary

In both these cases the older users are deemed to be 'lead users' (von Hippel, 1988), offering insights about self-motivated use ahead of their peers. By documenting their engagement with these particular SNS's over a period of three years it is possible to show how their use of social media is determined by positive adaptations to the ageing experience rather than its deficits. Qualitative

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[2] www.Redbubble.com

[3] www.zazzle.com

and ethnographic data (in the form of participant observations, contextual interviews and analyses of online behaviour) show the ways in which these older users identify SNS as relevant to their lives, constructing meaningful uses through ongoing involvement and adapting them to their own particular needs.

Through these studies, we identified six core (motivational) themes of relevance in relation to their appropriation of SNS: social contact; acquiring knowledge; supporting independence; intergenerational connection; reminiscence/life review and creativity. We explain these in terms of positive adaptations to ageing making particular reference to theories that address social adaptation.

This examination of appropriation of SNS by these older people highlights the importance of moving the inclusive design agenda beyond the functional concerns at the interface to provide a broader 'ecological view' of access and inclusion which can acknowledge positive adaptations to ageing as significant in framing motivated use of social media. It also highlights the importance of looking beyond the use of technology to support a care-driven 'aging in place' agenda to a quality of life-driven 'living in place' agenda in which SNSs can play a key role for enabling new forms of social connections and opportunities to contribute that matter to them.

## Acknowledgments

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