
Slow Side of the Divide?

Older ICT Non- and Seldom-Users Discussing Social Acceleration and Social Change

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Abstract

Older ICT non-users are often considered vulnerable and potentially socially and digitally excluded group. More recently age-based digital divides have been questioned by scholars aiming to provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between old age and technology non-use. Following this path, this article takes the experiences of being an older non- and/or seldom-ICT user and their potential exclusion as point of departure to talk about ideas and understandings of digital technologies and social change. The goal is to empirically explore and understand how the ideas and experiences of ICT non-usage are shared, and negotiated, among older non- and seldom-ICT users. The lived experience of different waves of mediatisation is a specific position in the life course allowing older people to reflect back upon changes prompted by technological development. The empirical data consist of six focus group interviews conducted in Sweden in 2017 with 30 older (65+) non- and seldom-users of ICT between the ages of 68 and 88 years. The results of the analysis show that by describing the ideas and experiences of non- and/or seldom-ICT use, the informants offer a broader reflection on social change and an ambivalent picture of social acceleration. They agree namely that digitalisation is an inevitable process but argue simultaneously that several practices connected to it are not necessarily making our lives easier. Participants experience the socio-technological development in the past 30 years as a very fast one, while adjustment to it seems to occur in a rather slow and weary way. It could be suggested that the nexus of old age on the one hand and non/seldom-ICT usage on the other, as well as their position in life, offer a perspective that can challenge the idea that technological development, ICT access and use are synonymous with efficiency, convenience and inclusion.

Introduction

Older ICT non-users are often considered vulnerable and potentially socially and digitally excluded, homogeneous group. Research on old age and digital technologies for decades have been informed by the idea of digital inequality and digital divide. More specifically, the *grey divide* suggests that old age and age-related factors constitute obstacles when it comes to ICT usage and older people (Millward 2003; cf. Quan-Haase et al. 2018). At the same time, however, even scholars who challenge the stereotypical portrayal of older people and ICT focus predominantly on older people's present technology adoption and position in the life course. This article, instead, takes the present position of being an older ICT seldom- and/or non-user as a *point of departure* in order to explore and understand how the ideas, current experiences and previous experiences of ICT (non)-usage are shared and negotiated. Additionally, instead of focusing mainly on ICT (non)-use, it also takes into account the lived experience of the wave of mediatisation, and more specifically – digitalisation – as facilitating reflection on social change and social acceleration.

The goal of this article is thus to empirically explore and understand how the ideas and cultural imageries of social acceleration and change are shared, and negotiated, among older non- and seldom-users of digital technologies. More specifically, it focuses on how older people reflect upon social change and development brought by digitalisation (cf. Couldry & Hepp 2017). Mediation and the communicative organisation of time are most often approached in terms of clocks, calendars and timetables. However, the lived experience of *wave of mediatisation*, which being a non- or seldom-user of ICT offers, is a specific *position in the life course*, which allows older people to reflect back upon the social change prompted by technological development.

This article builds on Wajcman's (2015) *social shaping of technology* approach and takes her call for more empirical research into experiences of time and technology use. It departs from the idea that understandings and norms pertaining to social and technological acceleration are situated and context embedded rather than universally experienced. She argues that since time and technology use differ for diverse social groups, in order to capture the diversity of experiences, we need to focus on empirical investigations into *when, where and how* people encounter accelerations and what are the consequences of this process for their lives (ibid: 15). Inspired by a feminist approach to knowledge as that of situated and contingent character, Wajcman suggests we need more research into how technologies shape people's practical perceptions, ideas and experiences of social time and technologies in everyday life (ibid: 22). This article asks two main questions:

How do older seldom- and non-users' experiences and understandings of ICT inform the way they reflect about digitalisation and social change? What narratives and discourses are invoked when older seldom- and non-users discuss digitalisation?

Digital Divides, Old Age and Beyond

The scholarly and public debate on digital divide have often departed from the myth about one, stable, universal internet and quite stereotypical image of computer users based on generation as cohort rather than chronological age (Becker & Hermkens 1993). Consequently, studies have focused on reasons and ideas on how to overcome difficulties that stand on the way while accessing and using ICT for the whole generations of “digital immigrants” as opposed to young and tech-savvy “digital natives” (Prensky 2001; Eastman & Iyer 2004). Studies on old age and ICT tend to be informed by a form of technological determinism departing from the belief that there is strong correlation between technological innovation and social change (cf. Wajcman 2015). In practice, this means that there has been considerable amount of studies focusing on how older people learn to use digital technologies (e.g. Cody et al. 1999; Turner et al. 2007; Seals et al. 2008; Russell 2011), reasons why and what they actually *do* online once they get there (e.g. Morris et al. 2007; Sum et al. 2009) or how ICT usage can possibly make their lives better (e.g. Kanayama 2003; Khvorostianov, Elias, & Nimrod 2011). When it comes to latter, issues such as well-being, self-efficacy and overcoming loneliness have been high on the research agenda (Blit-Cohen & Litwin 2005; Karavidas, Lim, & Katsikas 2005; Dickinson & Hill 2007; Sum et al. 2008). In other words, the vast majority of research on older people and ICT usage tends to focus either on the process of learning or on the impact of technology, often in terms of benefits and chances for productive, empowered aging (cf. Gilleard & Higgs 2008).

However, the bulk of research that have brought attention to older adults’ *actual experiences* of ICT have also emphasised the importance of situated usage as more appropriate way of studying the intersections of old age and new technologies. This implies that experiences of ICT need to consider the socio-cultural context of usage beyond merely beneficial aspects of ICT (e.g. Cutler, Hendricks, & Guyer 2003; Blit-Cohen & Litwin 2004; Campbell 2004; Nilsson Lindgren, & Forsberg 2009; Sum, Mathews, & Hughes 2009; Russell 2011). Additionally, it is important to mention the growing amount of studies that challenge the idea of old age as the major reason for lower levels of computer usage (e.g. Loges & Jung 2001; Selwyn 2006; Sourbati 2009). Other factors, such as lack of interest, immediate need and concerns about privacy, can also impact older people’s selective or even non-ICT usage (Weaver, Zorn, & Richardson 2010; Hakkarainen 2012). Consequently, we know that categories taking into account whole age cohorts such as “digital immigrants” bear little explanatory power when it comes to assessing diversity of ICT usage among older people. More recently, age-based digital divides have been questioned by scholars aiming to provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between old age and ICT technology use (e.g. van Deursen & Helsper 2015; Neves Waycott, & Malta 2018; König, Seifert, & Doh 2018). This research also challenges inaccurate assumptions that old age is a static category and that older people share similar experiences over their life course (e.g. Quan-Haase et al.

2018). The major contribution of recent scholarship on older people and ICT lies in the fact that knowledge about factors which correlate positively with lower internet skills, and thus potential digital exclusion, such as education or social capital, can possibly inform social policies focusing on digital inequality and digital inclusion. In other words, we know that digital skills, and lack of them, correlate positively with social inequalities, although for many years some researchers and policy-makers thought that the problem of digital divide would be solved when internet connection rate reaches saturation. Recent research shows to the contrary, the issue of digital inequality informed by the so-called first-level digital divide still remains a problem which has turned from inequality of physical access to inequalities of material access (van Deursen & van Dijk 2018). Consequently, scholars in digital inequality argue that we need to shift focus from whether older individuals are online or not to having a more complex discussion of how they vary in their abilities to engage fully in the information society (Hargittai, Piper, & Morris 2018).

However, scholarly debates on older people and ICT seldom go beyond the idea of digital divides. I would argue that in order to capture the experiences and understandings of ICT that older people have, and by doing so obtain a better insight into actual encounters with technology, we also need to engage with dominant narratives that inform those encounters. When it comes to technology use, including digital technology, the most prevalent narratives in social sciences have been those that address the questions of acceleration of social life and the role of time in modernity.

Timely Technology

The question of time in modern societies has been on a scholarly agenda for several decades. In social sciences, including media studies, it pertains mostly to the question of acceleration of social life, the fast pace of work and the flows of global capital and people (e. g. Mumford 1934; Virilio 1986; Elias 1992; Adam 1998; Tomlison 2007). More recently, Rosa (2013) suggested a comprehensive theory of social acceleration as the new theory of modernity. In his theory, social acceleration includes three intertwined processes of acceleration, namely in terms of accelerating *pace of life*, *technological acceleration* (including for instance transport, processing and communication) and *social change* (social relations, structures and institutions). Rosa argues that time is an inherent element and a principal dimension of modernity, to the point that experiences of being in a rush, constant speed and shortage of time are often employed to describe the modern way of living. In that sense, his theory is also a theory of late modernity. In this context, social acceleration means also acceleration of technologically based means of communication and a growing gap between our *space of experience* and our *horizon of expectations* (Rosa 2013: xxxvi, emphasis added). What other scholars point

out, time is also a principal dimension of communicative action. For instance, Couldry & Hepp (2017), inspired by Elias' notion of *figuration*, suggest that "time is a key dimension of how communications are involved in the construction of the social world. Time is the dimension where we see a social life's 'figurational order' put to test" (ibid: 103). In response to the theories and writings focusing on speed and acceleration, there is also growing body of academic and non-academic literature discussing the notion of slowness, particularly in relation to food, food cultures and lifestyle philosophy of the so-called slow living (e. g. Honore 2004; Park & Craig 2006).

However, when it comes to the experience of time, the majority of existing social theories of contemporary society tend to take for granted the link between technological development on the one hand and social acceleration on the other. For instance, Wajcman (2015) is critical of those abstract social theories saying that they remain schematic and abstract and do not really capture the diversity of experiences with time and technology. Her critique touches upon the assumptions present in the existing analyses of contemporary society that link speed and hurriedness of social life as well as constant connectivity with technological acceleration. She argues that those approaches risk falling into *technological determinism*, which is a claim that technological innovation is responsible and directly linked to social change. In other words, technological development is often assumed to be the major engine behind social development and progress.

Wajcman strongly rejects this view and argues instead for the *social shaping of technology* approach which implies that both social and technological changes are unpredictable, open ended and often shaped by social, political and economic factors. Consequently, from this point of view, there is hardly any universal and straightforward experience of time and technology. This is also to say that there are *multiple temporal landscapes* coming to play when people engage with digital technologies, including the ICT. Additionally, Wajcman's approach challenges the dominant cultural imageries of technological development that directly link technological innovation and change with constant connectivity, efficiency, convenience, novelty, time saving and progress. Her interest is in "how digital technologies are reshaping our sense of time without succumbing to the common obsession with novelty" (2015: 22). Wajcman argues that modern society is an "experience of living in and with profound ambivalence" (2015: 47) so that time, speed and mobility are *differently* understood, distributed, accessed and interpreted by people.

I suggest that a reflection on time offers a fruitful lens to analyse questions pertaining to digital inequalities and divides. This is because by departing from a situated experience of temporality, we have a chance to approach potentially vulnerable and marginalised groups from the perspective of their own experiences rather than departing from the static assumptions about their age, gender and/or social and economic status in the first place. Such approach provides thus a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between ICT technology and its users.

Methodology

The empirical data for this study were gathered as part of the research project funded by the Swedish Research Council in the period of 2015–2017 to investigate older non-users' understandings and experiences of digital technologies and how they relate to understandings of aging and old age. The material utilised in this article consist of six focus group interviews conducted in Sweden in the autumn of 2017. It encompasses 30 older (65+) non- and seldom-users of ICT between ages of 68 and 88, 18 female and 12 male, who were recruited through local associations for the retirees and clubs for 65+. Digitalisation is considered an important societal issue in Sweden, so the process of recruitment and getting in touch with gatekeepers was relatively unproblematic and fast. The gatekeepers, oftentimes, chairpersons for the retiree organisations, were approached with the question whether they have the possibility to inform their members about the research project. In the majority of cases, I have myself had an opportunity to come to their meetings and announce the project and its objectives. Selection criteria, apart from age, included lack of previous contact with ICT ("non-users") and/or some contact with ICT, like few times a week and willingness to learn more in the future ("seldom-users").

The material for this study comes from focus group interviews consisting of between four and six participants without previous familiarity with each other. This option was deliberately preferred since "strangers are forced to rely on culturally well-established ways of thinking and talking" (Strandell 2019). The method has been chosen as means and specific context to generate the macro-level normative discourse data, in this case, pertaining to digitalisation and social change. This is important to mention since focus group interviews have often previously been employed by researchers adopting a more conventional, naturalistic approach with the purpose to generate information and facts about given topic (Beck, Trombetta, & Share 1986). Also, this method has previously been approached from an interactionist perspective, where the focus is on the group dynamic and how things are negotiated by participants who take different positions in interaction, rather than what is being said (cf. Kania-Lundholm and Torres, 2015). Instead of the conventional or interactionist approach, focus group interviews in this study are treated as context and source of the normative, dominant discourses. From a discursive point of view, focus groups are sites of reproduction of socially and culturally embedded ways of giving meaning and thinking. This is also to say that a potential problem with this method, such as cognitive or social biases, can be turned into advantages when researchers look for methods generating sets of normative discourse data, the culturally prescribed ways of talking and thinking about a particular topic.

The potential cognitive and social biases informing the conventional and interactionist approaches include, for instance, the prevalence of majority or normative opinions which suppress individual, idiosyncratic and minority views (Nemeth &

Nemeth-Brown 2003) and the social desirability bias when people are motivated to express politically correct normative opinions and statements (cf. Dalton & Ortegren 2011). These are considered here as fruitful sources of data about older people's understandings and experiences of not only ICT non- and seldom-use but also about social acceleration and digitalisation of society. In order to facilitate generation of this type of material, during the course of interviews, which lasted about 70–80 min each, the study participants were presented with open, rather broad questions about digitalisation of society. For instance: “Do you remember your first encounter with computers?”, “What do you think about the idea of the paper-free society?”. Additionally, in order to facilitate the discussion and receive more spontaneous reactions, the participants were asked to comment on the headlines from main Swedish dailies about older peoples' experiences with ICT. Although this article does not directly follow any established tradition within discourse analysis, it is informed by the critical approach to discourse analysis which understands discourse as group of statements providing language for talking about and representing knowledge (Wodak 2013). This means that discourse refers to socially reproduced knowledge and social reality, and meaningful, often normatively reproduced, practices are constructed within and through discourse (ibid).

The analytical procedure involved multiple readings, coding of interview transcripts and looking for recurring, both implicit and explicit articulations that would reappear across *several groups*. In that sense, single statements were always considered in the broader context of the interview and across the whole material. Topics that were discussed by participants but were not brought by the moderator were also included in the analysis. In particular, an important aspect of the analysis has been the cross-group comparisons of normative discourses emerging as patterns of knowledge across focus groups. The overall goal of the analysis has been to reach conclusions about which discourses are available and dominate the discursive field. The emerging themes that informants have brought up included issues pertaining to the generational gaps in ICT use, relations with family and friends and cultural change. Below I present three of the most reoccurring themes that informed the discussion about informants' understandings and experiences of digital technologies. These pertain to social acceleration and change the ambivalent notion of time and the sense of nostalgia for the time lost.

Speeding Change: How Things are Now?

One of the reoccurring themes discussed by the participants across focus groups has been the experience of a very fast change, particularly in recent decades. Although they did not refer to any specific event or phenomenon, there was a general understanding among them that technology, and especially digital technology, have had an immense impact on their lives and on society in general. This

is of course not surprising, since the past few decades are described by scholars in terms of “the third wave of mediatisation” (Couldry & Hepp 2017). After the important media-technological innovations which prompted waves of mechanisation and later electrification came the wave of digitalisation. It roughly began in the 1950s with the invention of television, audiotape and later computers. Since the oldest among the informants was born in 1928 and the youngest in 1949, it could be argued that they have experienced the impact and consequences of the digitalisation wave in its entirety. Of course, one needs to take into account issues such as social position, resources and access to technologies since simply not everyone could have afforded every type of technology available. However, in a larger societal context and regardless of individual experiences with technology, the wave of digitalisation implied an intensified interrelatedness between different media and transformation of connective infrastructure. It also implied transformation of the internet itself, from the “closed publicly oriented network for specialist communication to deeply banal commercialized space for the conduct of social life itself” (ibid: 50). Especially this last transformation has been experienced as very fast by the participants. Discussion about their own experiences with ICT, past and present, has triggered a reflection upon the tempo of *social* development and change.

For instance, when asked about their experiences with computers, they often pointed to how fast everything has changed and how difficult it has become to adapt to those changes. In the extract below, Gunilla, Olle and Inger reflect upon this in the following way:

Interviewer: Please tell me how did you experience this development [digitalisation]?

Gunilla: It went very fast, very fast and the fact that there are no longer any alternatives left, they're taken away because everything depends on the one or the other. And that goes very fast as well.

Interviewer: Can you give an example of what has changed?

Olle: Well, it's that one is supposed to make an effort.

Inger: There should be alternatives, now I cannot come with [an example], but problems are there to be solved. (Group #5)

What is interesting is that the speed of change is connected here to the lack of alternatives and at the same time, what Inger stresses, alternatives *should be* there. It could be argued that the commentary on the present invites also its critique (cf. Kania-Lundholm and Torres 2018). Across the interviews, participants often mentioned alternatives in terms of non-digital access to services such as purchasing tickets or paying bills that involve interpersonal face-to-face contact. Instead, what Olle points out, more and more services are only available in digital form and people are forced to cope and make effort by themselves. The pressure on autonomous management and individual responsibility are, of course, features of modernity and modern living. In other words, digitalisation has not only brought

fast change and lack of alternatives, but it also brought pressure on individuals to deal with its consequences. Coping with this new situation can be difficult and challenging. It is particularly difficult when one cannot count on family members to help. Björn, who was the only person in the sample who did not disclose his age, summarises his experience in the following way:

Björn: There's a deficiency in my case, since I don't have any grandchildren and it's obvious that one is already living with it [...] I have enormously huge deficit there, and also I'm against this fast development when it comes to IT, at least for me, in this age ... It happens too fast and one... one doesn't keep up... [...] I have a regular phone and an old mobile phone but why am I supposed to acquire a need that I don't have, I don't understand it...
(Group #1)

Björn could be defined as a seldom-user. He owns a PC and a mobile phone, surfs the internet occasionally and knows how to pay the bills online. He believes this is the minimum to survive and live a relatively decent life without needing extra help from relatives. At the same time, Björn, like several other participants, particularly those who do not go online daily and the non-users, feels that he has a difficulty to keep up. In a similar manner, also across other focus groups, digitalisation and technological development were discussed as processes creating new needs and expectations. Participants, due to their age and/or social position in life, often do not have a possibility to meet those expectations. In their narratives, informants often make claims that are pointing to the deepening gap between what Rosa (2013) calls the *space of experience* and *horizon of expectations*. Those narratives also offer a rather specific understanding of how digital technologies shape participants' understandings of time.

Stealing Time: How Things have Changed?

One of the central aspects of the experiences discussed in the focus groups was how participants connected various online activities with the idea of "wasted time." Both non- and seldom-users shared an understanding that it takes time to learn how to use a computer, it takes time to fix when things do not work as they should, but it also takes time to use it once one has learned the appropriate skills. The exchange between Lasse, Kajsa, & Bosse, two seldom-users and one non-user, respectively, illustrates how time is experienced as waste when being online:

Lasse: I was thinking about how it was before and it work pretty well, most of it...I think it doesn't function well, it's confusing... my computer and my attempts [to fix it] have been ... I have put extremely lot of time in vain just because it doesn't work as it should and because one is not an expert so one doesn't know every time what the malfunctioning depends

on [...] I think that one loses so much time and I have other stuff to do. No problem to find things to do rather the opposite, I've been out picking berries last week.

I: I'd like to hear more about it please.

Bosse: Well, I think it's presumptuous to force old people to learn knowledge and skills that one does not have...Cause one is so stiff in the brain and it does not stick well.

Lasse: And even if it does... it's easy to forget as fast.

Kajsa: Yeah, and then it changes so fast anyway... (Group #3)

This excerpt summarises the specific logic of thinking that participants agreed upon when discussing their experiences. In particular, when things go wrong, it takes time to fix and that time in itself is already wasted waiting "in vain." The time waste is amplified by juxtaposing it with "other things to do," such as picking berries, or playing the piano as gentleman in different group expressed. It could be argued that the "time wasted" and "time valued" exist in a parallel relationship and are at the core of the experiences of ITC non-(use) among older people interviewed for this project. Internet and sitting in front of a computer have often been described as a "time thief" (*tidstjuv* in Swedish). This term reappeared several times in the context of discussions about negative aspects of digital technologies. This is what Gunilla, Inger, & Ludde address in the extract below:

Gunilla: It takes a lot of time to sit in front of a computer and search and understand, it takes very long time, one or two hours goes very fast.

I: Do the others experience it too?

Inger: Yes, it is really like that.

Gunilla: A real time thief... and then one has so many people around who spent so much time with their phones...

Ludde: Yes, Facebook

Gunilla: Facebook ... and everything that comes with it ... people get more introvert in a way...

Inger: I have a grandchild who sits at home with his phone and a computer and I think he doesn't have any friends.

I: How old is he?

Inger: He is thirteen but then, at the same time, one can get quite surprised when I talk to him because he knows so much and when I ask: where did you learn all of this? From the internet- he says. (Group #5)

The idea that the time which is spent in front of a computer is a "time stolen," pertains to participants themselves and their own experiences, but also comes from their observations of other people. As mentioned by Inger, this pertains also to those who use mobile phones. It could be argued that because the participants make an assumption that time online is wasted, it also means that it does not bring any value, is not productive in any way. This is illustrated by Inger, who

admits being “surprised” that her grandson, who allegedly spends a lot of time online, actually “knows a lot” because of that.

Struggles over time and distinction between productive and non-productive time constitute one of the central sites of contradictions of capitalism (Fisher 2018). Particularly in the past decades, when capitalism began to increasingly rely on labour power deposited in the unpaid, free and non-productive time, the struggles over time include also the *discursive distinction* between the productive and non-productive time (ibid:43). However, in spite of the fact that some of the informants have been in touch with computers in their professional life, their understandings and experiences of ICT are informed by the idea of ICT as belonging to the unproductive, free time. Additionally, this idea of computer time as waste is also possibly amplified by their rather lacking or limited knowledge and user skills. Consequently, not only has the social and tech development been experienced as fast, but it also brought new challenges when it comes to time management in the everyday life. This situation results in the sense of loss and nostalgia for the time that has passed.

In Search of Time Lost: How Things Should Be?

The reflection on change and the role of digital technologies in it have also triggered a reflection about social interaction and socialising in general. Interestingly, the participants often brought public places, such as busses and trains as sites illustrating the asocial behaviour prompted by new technologies. For instance, the importance of eye contact which is limited due to people’s preoccupation with mobile phones was often mentioned, as the excerpt below shows:

Henrik: Dogs and animals search for an eye contact [with their owners] and people even do not look at each other... yes, there was research about this; cats and dogs are not friendly, they get anxious because of that.

I: Because the owners focus on something else?

Henrik: Yes, exactly, they want to keep an eye contact.

Gunilla: Yes, and it is the same when mums go with their prams and then they just put on some show [on a mobile phone] so the kids can watch...

[...]

Olle: But what should we do about it then?

Henrik: We need to talk about it... We should do as you said earlier and say: ‘now I have invited you all in here not so you can sit and stare at your phones but so we can sit down and talk’ and if one doesn’t accept it then they can just go. (Group #5)

In this example, Henrik and Gunilla show their awareness of a potential social problem and agree that the new technologies inhibit an eye contact and communication both when it comes to humans and animals. They seem to be convinced

and reach a unanimous decision that continuous staring at the mobile devices instead of talking and interacting is not an acceptable form of behaviour. Henrik also makes a clear point saying that message about this should be communicated to potential guests when invited home for dinner. At the same time, participants distance themselves from such, often defined by them as “asocial,” practices. It could be argued that by reflecting on their experiences of being non- and/or seldom-users, they get a chance to articulate their own opinions about the place and role of new technologies in society. An exchange between Karin and Daria, both non-users and Elin and Anna, seldom-users, illustrates how observing other people’s engagements with technology reassures them in their position:

Karin: Yes, but we still do talk to each other, but not the young ones, I promise you, my grandchildren sit at home with their... well, at least my youngest one, she is twelve.

Daria: Yes, I reflect more on this in my age, they will do it when they become adults, too.

Elin: Do you watch sometimes when at a restaurant, people sit and stare at their mobiles... look in different directions, they’re sitting together because they’re supposed to dine together, I don’t get it, people are slipping away from each other.

Daria: Look on the train, the train, the busses, everyone is sitting with their mobiles, I see it often cause I travel a lot by train since I sold my car.

[...]

Anna: It’s the same in the city, sometimes I just jump up when someone starts talking to me, it’s so unusual.

Elin: Yes, and then someone can come on their bike and they can barely see that someone is approaching. It has gotten so terrible I think. (Group #6)

Karin’s mentioning that “we still talk to each other” needs to be interpreted in the context of, and in relation to, other people’s preoccupation with technologies. Participants suggest that social bonds and the shape of community suffer as a consequence of individuals’ engagement with their devices. In their eyes, people who constantly stare on their phones are not only “slipping away” from each other but they also become a potential danger on the streets and in the traffic. In principle, across all the focus groups, participants were mentioning the silence in public places, particularly in public transport. As once one could board a bus or a train and engage in a random conversation with a co-passenger, these days people do not speak to each other. Sharing these experiences in a group has also triggered a broader reflection on a change of the community. In a nostalgic manner, Björn describes how idyllic life before the advent of technologies was:

Björn: Well, I miss the time when one could go to the railway station and buy a ticket wherever you wanted to go, one could go to the post office and buy a stamp, one could go to the doctor, just like that, take a sit in a waiting room and he opened the door [welcoming]: ‘Please come in’ and then one could get a referral to the hospital, it was so much easier, everything was so idyllic. (Group #1)

As Hampton & Wellman (2018) have pointed out, historically, the objects of moral panics included industrialisation, bureaucratisation, urbanisation and, most recently, technological development and digitalisation. They also argue that “since the advent of the internet, the moral panickers have seized on this technology as the latest cause of lost community, pointing with alarm to what digital technologies are doing to relationships” (ibid: 643). Although I would not go as far to suggest calling the participants in this study moral panickers, the shared narratives of nostalgia for the time before advent of internet certainly echo discourses informing their understandings and experiences. The loss of social contact and conversation are often mentioned alongside discussions about disappearance of public services in their previous form. This is what Björn points to when mentioning purchasing tickets, stamps and visiting a doctor. The form and type of provision of those services, as much as the entire structure of the welfare system in Sweden, has certainly radically changed in the past decades. For the participants in this study, discussion about digitalisation of society has triggered reflections about how de-personalised the majority of services has become. Instead of meeting a “real person,” like a clerk in a bank or a post office, one is expected to use online services instead. However, it is important to mention that, albeit often implicitly, the participants link the “time before computers” with the period of their youth. This is done by Katja when discussing the past:

Interviewer: Do you miss this time?

Linda: Nooo, I don't, but one gets surprised to see what kind of development I have experienced [throughout life], and then one thinks this is much faster tempo now, one has to make faster decisions, too.

Interviewer: Do you experience that you can still keep up?

Britta: Yes, so far ... just getting a bit scarred of how it's going to be in the future.

Katja: I don't do it, cause I'm just about to say that it was better before, ha ha.

Interviewer: Please tell us more!

Katja: The time before computers.

Interviewer: What was better then?

Katja: Well, I could manage everything. Back then I wasn't a sissy who couldn't do anything and who needed help, cause back then I could buy tickets by myself and I didn't need anyone to fix or arrange things for me. (Group #4)

For Katja as well as for Linda and Britta, both seldom-users, the “time before computers” is not necessarily entirely missed, but certainly their reflection about it triggers an understanding of how fast things have changed. For Katja, who is 78 and a non-user, the present digitalised society makes her dependent on the help from others, something that can also relate to her vulnerable position as an older non-user. Again, as Hampton & Wellman (2018) suggest, the nostalgia for the past often comes from both a “selective perception of the present and idealization of other forms of community” (ibid: 644). In this case, participants tend to

idealise the time before digitalisation as, to some extent, more “authentic” and “social.” This type of nostalgia is often informed by some form of technological determinism that links new technologies and ubiquitous connectivity with loneliness and decline of face-to-face conversation (cf. Turkle 2011).

Discussion and Conclusion

This article focused on exploring and understanding how the ideas and experiences of ICT are shared and discussed, among older seldom- and non-users. The informants’ specific position in the life course, namely having the possibility to experience and live through the wave of digitalisation, became a departure point for a reflection and discussion about technological development and social change. The employed method, focus group interviews, were approached in here as a specific context and means to generate normative, dominant discourses pertaining to digitalisation and social change. When reflecting and sharing their own ideas and experiences, participants have referred to different notions of *time*. They agreed that digitalisation have brought fast changes, particularly in recent years, that many older people have difficulties keeping up with. However, although rather slow and weary, adaptation to this situation is a must one has to cope with. By linking the new technologies with the idea of “time wasted,” participants make a clear distinction between time spent online and time spent doing other, more “real” things. Consequently, the time “before computers” is also an object of nostalgia, of mourning of the “time lost.” Thus, the results of the analysis show that by describing the ideas and experiences of non- and/or seldom-ICT use, the informants offer a broader reflection on social change and provide rather ambivalent picture of social acceleration (cf. Rosa 2013). They agree that digitalisation is an inevitable process but also argue that several practices connected to it are not necessarily making their lives easier. Instead, they experience the socio-technological development in the past years as a very fast one, while adjustment deems to occur in a rather slow and weary way.

When it comes to narratives informing the discussions, technological determinism seems to be the dominant framework informing the reflection about technology and social change among the participants of this study. This is not a surprising finding, since, as Wajcman (2015) argues, technological determinism is “the most influential common-sense assumption about the relationship between technology and society” (ibid: 27). The implicit logic of the assumptions made by the participants oscillates around the reflection on the speed of socio-technological changes and social acceleration. As a consequence of those changes, participants find it difficult, confusing and even alienating to adjust and cope with the situation. The reflection on the role of technology today triggers a nostalgic loop into the past. That in itself points to technological determinism, underpinned by the view that digital media, the internet and mobile devices are responsible for

social isolation and dismantling of the community. Such views are not only specific to this particular group of participants, but have rather for years informed public, media and some scholarly discussions (cf. Turkle 2011; Twenge 2017). However, it is important to mention that this form of technological determinism, which points to the negative consequences of technology, bears resemblance to cyberpessimism or cyberskepticism. Cyberpessimism alongside cyberoptimism are the two major positions that scholars, researchers and public intellectuals have taken when analysing and making sense of the developing digital society (Lindgren 2017). As Lindgren has recently pointed out: “the pendulum of cyberoptimism and cyberpessimism swings back and forth” (ibid: 51). For instance, when it comes to discourses informing policies that aim to tackle aspects of digital exclusion and digital inequality, cyberoptimism seems to be the dominant approach at work (cf. Verdegem & Verhoest 2009). These discourses constitute often the point of departure for policies tackling the most vulnerable groups in society, including older people. It is often based on the assumption that technology and internet are not only neutral but also that they contribute to development, progress and general well-being. The results of this study illustrate, however, that specific experiences and understandings of digitalisation among older seldom- and non-users are leaning towards cyberpessimism. This is to say that not only there are variety of experiences pertaining to technology but also that discourses which inform those experiences and understandings are context embedded and differently shape individual’s perceptions and ideas. Consequently, I argue, *the nexus of old age* on the one hand and *non/seldom-ICT usage* on the other offers a perspective that can challenge the cyberoptimistic idea of technological development, ICT access and use as synonymous with efficiency, convenience and inclusion. Moreover, such perspective can offer a better insight into how media and technological innovations on the one hand and social change on the other shape everyday experiences of coping with challenges brought by digitalisation in later life.

Moreover, the studies on digital inequalities and divides should include questions of time, the sociological approaches to time and technology in order to illuminate experiences and how people engage with technologies but also what discourses inform their experiences. The results of this study show the importance of understanding how time is perceived by different groups. On the one hand, they reproduce cultural narratives concerning how technology is speeding up life, but on the other they combine it with personal experience of how things get more difficult, more isolating and more time consuming. This ambivalence in itself is rather a specific feature of modernity and a living modern life. In a sense, participants in this study offer a reflection “from the outside” that should be read *not* as nostalgic lamenting for the time lost but rather as the one that can be helpful in understanding the variety of experiences and problematic aspects of what technology can and cannot do. So far, we know that the “configuration of people’s community networks both *constrains* and *creates* opportunities” (Hampton & Wellman 2018: 646) and that technology is embedded in community. This is

to say that the fact that people live alone is not necessarily a matter of personal choice but a consequence of contemporary social structure involving increased mobility, expansion of networks and changes in the family structure. In other words, technologies did indeed change and reshaped communities but not necessarily entirely withered them. The metaphor of digital divide is a powerful one, but not necessarily always an accurate one. It is based on the myth of one, neutral and universal internet and the assumption that everyone wants to and should be online that in practice seldom exists.

Last but certainly not least; the ideas shared by participants in this study about the negative impact of technology and fast pace of change bear striking resemblance to, proliferating in media and scholarly debates in recent years, discourses about online disconnection and praise of slow living (Park & Craig 2006; Karppi 2018). Future research could address how such “unplugging” talk about having a more balanced relationship with technology resonates with different social groups, including older people, not necessarily only those who are directly prone to information fatigue and overload. It could also address questions pertaining to the ways of coping with the culture of connectivity that raises concerns about people’s health and well-being (Klinenberg 2018).

Acknowledgements

The author of this article received founding from the Swedish Research Council (grant number 2014-6763).

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