Title: Self-initiated (re)education of digital technology in retired content creators
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Abstract

The retired population in the UK is rising and statistics show that the growth in the use of digital technologies and the web are also increasing within this age group. Small but substantial proportions are using the web for something more than to search and consume online goods and materials. This article explores what and where retired people learn digital technologies, skills often more directly associated with people born into a digital world. Through the use of qualitative data this article provides an insight into the (re)education of retired Internet users who are using digital technology and web media to create and share their own content. Digital technology within this sample of over 65s is often learnt unintentionally as a consequence of adopting a new hobby or interest in retirement or the rediscovery of an old one that they may not have been able to explore prior to retirement.

Self-initiated (re)education of digital technology in retired content creators

Keywords: retirement, digital technology, web media, content creation, sharing

1.0 Introduction

In the first few years of the twenty-first century, access to and use of Web 2.0 tools and digital technologies in the UK increased considerably (Office for National Statistics, 2010). Consequently, the process of creating digital content for everyday, non-professional web users has become more achievable than in previous decades and is now no longer the exclusive domain of the professional. This practice has been accelerated with the advent of high-speed broadband connections, more powerful home computers and greater choice of web media tools and platforms. Users from outside a professional framework are now able to create and share digital content through virtual communities and online platforms relatively easily. Many academics and media commentators (Gauntlett, 2011; Castells, 2009; Leadbeater, 2008; Shirky, 2008; Benkler, 2006; Poster, 1995) see this as a significant shift away from the manner in which individuals traditionally receive and 'passively' consume professionally produced media. Individuals are now able to create and publish their own content online enabling them to become actively, responsively and inclusively engaged. The creation and sharing of this user-generated content has demanded that traditional media organisations adapt and reassess their modus operandi, as argued by David Gauntlett in his book *Making is Connecting.*

> Just 20 years ago [...] you had to be one of the absolute elite, employed by a media organisation, and selected to produce content, to even get to speak. Today, a lot of non-elite, non-professional people are creating and sharing media, making their mark on the world, and sharing what they have to say about an incredibly diverse range of spheres and subjects (2011:233).

Creating and sharing digital content is a practise that has been adopted by all ages of society and is not exclusive to young people. Much has been written about the dexterity and competence of so-called 'digital natives' and the ability of the 'net' or 'digital' generation to learn to use technology (Tapscott, 2009; Palfrey and Gasser, 2008; Prensky, 2001). These arguments appear somewhat unconvincing in a post Web 2.0 environment. People of all ages learn technology in a diversity ways and there may be many different reasons why they participate in this activity. For instance, it could be dependent on availability of time, access to knowledge and technologies, workplace experiences, or ability to learn skills, along with their own personal motivations. Therefore, the relevance of the term 'generation' requires examination with regard to people learning digital technologies.

In recent years a considerable amount of valuable research has been conducted into the impact of technology on children and young people (Buckingham, 2006; Livingstone, 2002). This has been complimented by statistical surveys of the UK populace (Becta, 2010; Office for National Statistics, 2010). However, little is known of the digital skills acquired by older retired people.

So what of the older generations who use digital technology and particularly those who create and share content? Are they handicapped from learning digital technology and creating digital content due to their age and perceived lack of acquiescence? The following empirical analysis looks at retired people who create, share and publish digital content on the Internet. It examines *where* and *what* they have been learning that has enabled them to acquire the digital skills needed to produce online content. On a wider level, it asks whether the association between old age and lack of Internet use is still an appropriate notion and whether use of the term 'generation' is correct for measuring the adoption and use of digital technology.

Data has been produced using qualitative research through face-to-face interviews with participants who are already engaged in creating and sharing digital content via the Internet. Before moving to the methodology and analysis this article will begin with a brief examination into whether a digitally knowledgeable 'generation' really exists or whether learning digital technology is more experientially age non-specific.

2.0 A question of generations

Karl Mannheim wrote about generations in the 1920s and developed a generational theory that is often contemporarily cited (Kertzer, 1983; Edmunds and Turner, 2002; Buckingham, 2008; Luecke, 2009). In *The Problem with Generations* (1952) he formulated a synchronic structure comprising three components; generation location, generation as actuality and generation unit. These three parts express how people born at a certain time interpret and respond to the life chances presented to them. Most pertinent to this article are generation units, which are sub-groups or sub-divisions with different and sometimes conflicting units within a generation. "[T]hose groups within the same actual generation which work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways constitute different generational units" (Mannheim, 1952:314). Mannheim also believed that as the speed of change in society increases, the boundaries between generations are likely to become less distinct.

Drawing from many years of teaching diverse groups of young people, Siva Vaidhyanathan argues that talk of a digital generation is a 'generational myth' and that not all young people are tech-savvy and believes that the assumption that people are 'born digital':

> wilfully ignores the vast range of skills, knowledge, and experience of many segments of society. It ignores the needs and perspectives of those young people who are not socially or financially privileged. It presumes a level playing field and equal access to time, knowledge, skills, and technologies (Vaidhyanathan, 2008:2)

Thinking in generational terms is too simplistic as knowledge and understanding of technology varies greatly within all age groups. Consequently, there is a danger of overestimating the digital skills of young people and underestimating those of older age groups, a point argued by David Buckingham:

> To a greater or lesser extent, technological change affects us all, adults included. Yet the consequences of technology depends crucially on how we use technology and what we use it for, and these things are subjected to a considerable degree of social variation within age groups as between them (Buckingham, 2006:11).

Therefore, the term 'generation' is problematic when used in this instance for the categorisation of age delineation due to generic assumptions, perceptions and attitudes associated with each generation. This is particularly critical in the digital era when the distinction and definitions made between 'digital natives' and 'digital immigrants' can differ considerably *within* generations and be less divergent *between* generations. Tapscott (2009) and Prensky's (2001) standpoints presume the use of technology to be neatly ordered into definitive groups, when in reality there is a greater crossover of skills, experience and knowledge.

These suppositions also ignore the proliferated and extensive use of digital technology in the workplace over the last two decades, enabling many 'immigrants' to access and learn digital technology over a longer period than many 'natives'. Indeed, White and de Cornu argue, "technology, computer applications […] have moved on to the point that the Native/Immigrant dichotomy is now redundant" (2011:2) and prefer the age-neutral term 'visitors and residents'. This describes 'visitors' as "unlikely to have any form of persistent profile online which projects their identity into the digital space" (ibid.:5). While for 'residents' the Web is "a place to express opinions, a place in which relationships can be formed and extended. [...] A proportion of their lives is actually lived out online where the distinction between online and off–line is increasingly blurred" (ibid.).

The concept of a 'net' or 'digital' generation, where a particular age group of web users are defined and characterised by their knowledge, behaviour, use and adoption of technology, has been shown to be flawed and problematic. The notion tends to ignore the diverse backgrounds and experience of each user and their access to digital technology. It can be equally as dissimilar or can span over a period of over many decades. Furthermore, it disregards the interdependence and convergence of old and new media.

3.0 The over 65s in the UK

The population in England and Wales is living longer and society is aging (Office for National Statistics, 2012a). Although an estimated six million people over-65 in the UK have still never used the Internet (AgeUK, 2010) the number of people using the Internet in this age group is rising. Office for National Statistics data for 2012 shows that 62.4 per cent of people aged between 65–74 and 27.7 per cent of over-75s use the Internet and this has been growing year on year (2012b). Initiatives in the UK, such as Race Online 2012[1], aim to raise these percentages. Particular targets of this campaign are the older, digitally excluded nonusers of the Internet. Some of the reasons for exclusion may be a lack of motivation or feeling too old to learn new skills. They may have a fear of technology and no e-literacy skills. There may be security and privacy concerns, little or no access to computers, or they may simply not be able to afford to go online (Morris and Brading, 2007). Some are unclear as to how digital technology can provide an alternative or supplement to personal contact, for example to letter writing and using the phone (Hanson, 2009). Outside these reasons there are a still a number of older people that are 'digitally dismissive' 'refuseniks' of computers and the Internet, who are unlikely to be persuaded otherwise (Age Concern and Help the Aged, n.d.).

Since the early days of the web a polarised view of this age group has emerged. On the one hand there is the popular notion of the 'silver surfer' as the older 'tech-savvy' web user and on the other, that of the fearful, or reticent nonuser. This has lead to an oversimplified perception of this age group. (Selwyn, 2004). This may have in part derived from early research of over-65s in the UK, which found that the Internet was used less for researching hobbies, playing games and browsing for fun than younger age groups (Selwyn et al., 2003). Findings on the boundary between work and leisure in retirement showed that some retirees were hesitant to define their use of computer technologies as leisure due in part to the reskilling needed to use computers and the Internet (Buse, 2009).

However, in 2012 the over-65s is a large and diverse group where use of computers and the Internet is equally varied. Levels of skills, knowledge and ability are dependent on a number of characteristics ranging from health, education, and previous employment to socio-economic reasons. Evidence has emerged that this age group uses the Internet for more than just simple browsing. A report by AgeUK (2010) recorded that as many as 22 per cent of people aged 65 and over had purchased goods over the Internet. This 22 per cent included 44 per cent purchasing holiday accommodation, 40 per cent buying books, magazines, and newspapers, 38 per cent purchasing clothes and sports goods with 37 per cent ordering household goods. In addition 20 per cent downloaded films and music from the Internet, rather than buying them from a shop or receiving them by post. Statistics from this report also suggest that a higher level of computer and Internet literacy is present in this age group than is commonly perceived and their use of these technologies may be related to the usefulness of an application in their everyday lives.

Indeed, Office for National Statistics stated that 22 per cent of over-65s who use the Internet have "upload[ed] self-created content to a website to be shared" (2010:13) (see Fig. 1). Although the report did not qualify as to what constituted 'self-created content', whether this was simply writing a comment on a blog or the more complex process of making a video, this is a significant enough percentage not to be ignored. It suggests a move towards the practice of self-production and self-publishing in addition to the consumption of services and purchasing.

Uploading of self-created content to any website and shared
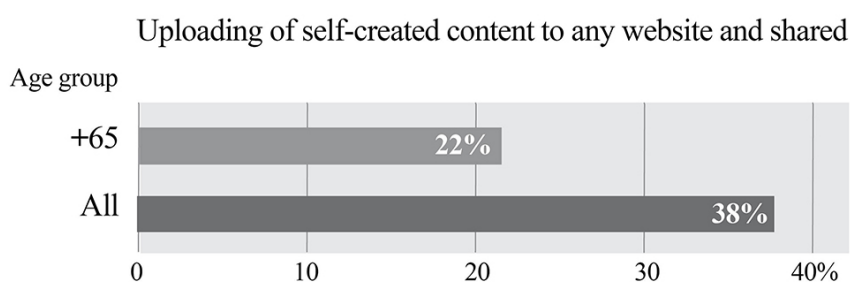
Source: Office of National Statistics - Internet Access 2010 UK Households and Individuals, 27th August 2010

Figure 1. Uploading self-created content to any website and shared. (Office for National Statistics, 2010:13)

In examination of this move towards self-production and self-publishing, a research project by Karahasanovic et al. conducted three separate studies into older people's user requirements for co-creation and user-generated content (UGC). The outcome of these studies showed that older Internet users, "are very motivated to contribute with UGC, given the right

circumstances [and] it is important they be able to use the new technologies easily" (Karahasanovic et al., 2008:655). Raban and Brynin report that:

> aging is not a one-dimensional process [and] it would be wrong to assume that only the young have learning curves, even if they move along these curves faster (Raban and Brynin, 2006:43).

Findings developing from a 2002 eLiving survey, which looked at technology use in six different countries, suggests that "a large proportion of older people are ready to adopt new technologies and have positive attitudes towards technology" (abid.:48). Many of these findings contradict the polemical claims made by Prensky (2001) of a 'digital native' versus 'digital immigrant' and by Tapscott (2009) of a 'net generation' against the 'baby boomer generation' and 'generation x'. The later terms of which are used pejoratively in this case.

4.0 Methodology

This article uses data collected from twelve retired participants aged 65–84 between March 2011 and February 2012. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in London and the South East of England with the exception of one participant who lived in Derbyshire, UK. This interview was completed using Skype with a two-way camera connection, enabling both interviewer and interviewee a visual context. All interviews were conducted in a semi-structured and open-ended manner. No financial or gift incentive was given to any of the participants and all gave information freely and without premeditation or instruction. No time limit was set for interviews and each interviewee was given as much time to speak and answer questions, as they required. Each interview lasted between 25 to 80 minutes generating a total of over nine hours of data.

The criterion for selecting participants was that they were over-65 and currently using the Internet and digital technology to create and share content. Every participant in this study was no longer in paid employment and was in retirement. Participants were selected from a variety of methods, including media sharing websites (Flickr, YouTube and personal blogs) to source appropriate online practices and for contacting participants. However, several participants were more responsive to direct face-to-face requests for interviews. Personal visits to organised groups helped reassure the validity and genuine nature of the project.

Defining digital content and content creation

The term, 'digital content' in this article refers to the numerical representation of information in a digital form (Manovich, 2001). Content may also originate from an analogue form but,

through the process of digitalisation, becomes remediated into a digital form (Bolter and Grusin, 2000). The creation of digital content can mean anything from a simple typed comment on a social network site to a more complex video production. 'Digital content creation' in the context of this article is defined as: *An arrangement of visual and/or audio material that requires some element of composition or editing and has been created outside of a professional framework.* Digital text is not included in this definition, other than its association to the visual and/or audio content. The inclusion of digital text would make the analysis of content too broad and would include more basic communication such as commenting on a blog or a social network site status update. 'User-generated content', is content that has been created by the user and shared on the Internet (Shirky, 2008). This differs from the use of the term 'digital content creation' or 'self-created content' in definition as the latter is digitally created or digitally remediated by the user but not yet shared or published via the Internet.

Sharing

In the digital world 'sharing' has many different meanings. Sharing by individuals often means to make a copy of a digital object or 'sharing' a hyperlink with a friend via an email, social network site or the Web. Therefore, sharing in the context of this article is any visual and/or audio material that is sent via the Internet to others or made available to other users via the Web.

5.0 Over 65 sample overview

An obvious consequence and added benefit of retirement is the availability of more free time to indulge in leisure activities. Retirement has given the majority of the participants in this age group the freedom and opportunity to either renew an interest they had earlier in life, which work had restricted them from doing, or adopt new interests through re-education in universities, colleges or groups such as the University of the Third Age (U3A)[2].

All of the participants worked in non-creative jobs or industries prior to retirement, five of the sample in professional occupations and six in none or semi-professional employment. One described herself as a "housewife". Several have acquired computer knowledge and skills from their working lives or adopted digital technology after retirement as an extension of a hobby or interest. This has provided the skills for them to extend their knowledge by specialising in specific computer or digital art courses, rather than embarking on general computer access courses, therefore enabling them to develop digital content creation skills.

Due to the participants' inclination towards the practices of creating and sharing content, they were generally drawn to technology or artistically-focused subjects. By definition, they could

therefore be considered relatively computer proficient. However, this proficiency was diverse throughout the sample. The research sample had been using the web for a number of years prior to being interviewed and all of the participants were currently creating content at the time of the interview. Seven of the twelve interviewees began using the Internet between 2000 to 2003, with two starting in the mid to late 1990s, one in the late 1980s and one as little as three to four years ago (see Fig.2).

Eight of the sample finished their pre-employment education at secondary school level with the remainder attending further or high education. On retirement there was a high uptake in formal education through local colleges with some taking higher education degrees in universities. Most chose to study visual arts subjects such as digital photography and art, or digitally related software programs such as Adobe Photoshop or Dreamweaver. Several had acquired new skills in a creative subject that also involved technical and software proficiencies. This enabled them to pursue creative activities that they were either discouraged from doing, or were not confident to embrace in their earlier life.

Several of the participants' introductions to the Internet, web and digital content creation came via an involvement in outside non-digital activities and interests. Consequently some have learnt the basics of how to upload digital photographs, create blogs, build a website through formal college courses, traditional books and manuals. Several in the early stages of re-education are more likely to use traditional learning resources such as books. However, as they use the skills they learn in formal education, they are inclined to develop 'trial and error' learning techniques, which include the Web to source learning materials or online tutorials that enable greater proficiency in their use of digital technology. Of the twelve participants half said that they started to create and share content in the mid-2000s with three starting in the early 2000s, two stating that it was a 'recent' activity and one started creating content in 2005 but did not start sharing until a couple of years ago (see Fig.2).
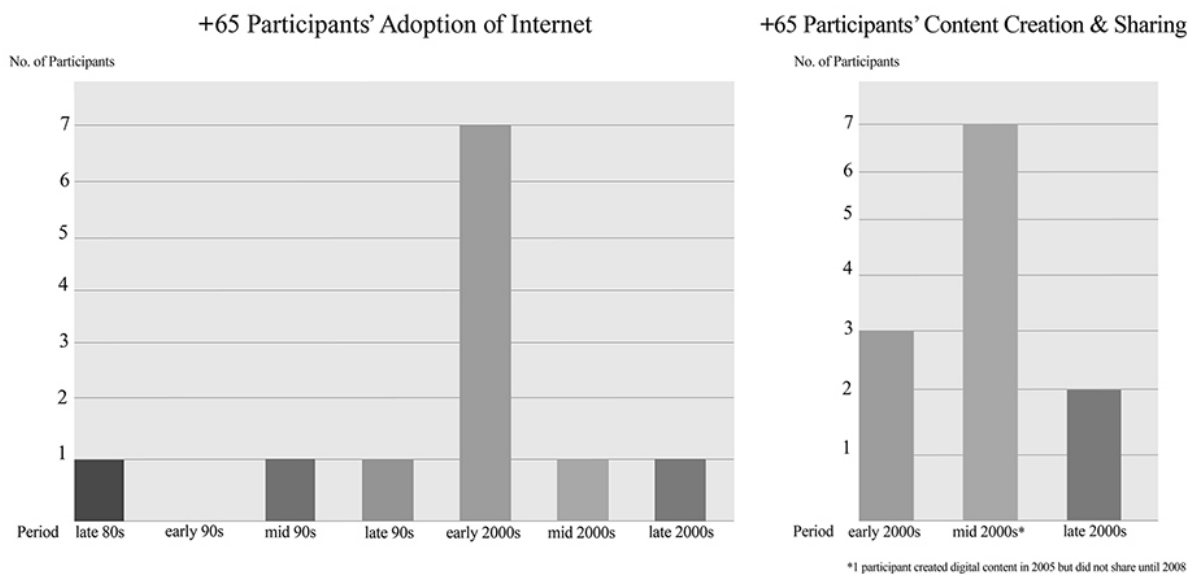
No. of Participants

No. of Participants

Period | late 80s | early 90s | mid 90s | late 90s | early 2000s | mid 2000s | late 2000s

Period | early 2000s | mid 2000s* | late 2000s

*1 participant created digital content in 2005 but did not share until 2008

Fig. 2 +65 Adoption of the Internet and Creation of Content and Sharing

(Re)education and learning in retirement

By and large retired adults return to education voluntarily and because they have chosen a subject or interest they want to learn and is part of a lifelong learning activity. Lifelong learning is defined by the European Commission as the "lifelong, voluntary and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge for personal or professional reasons" (European Commission: Eurostat, n.d.). Learning after retirement has been the common feature that defines all the participants in this age group.

Formal (re)education in retirement

The availability of more free time in retirement offers the prospect of developing new skills or enhancing old ones without the pressures or deadlines of a working environment. With this comes and a feeling of freedom too. One participant, Bob, aged 69 at the time of the interview, expressed a common view within the twelve retired participants. "When you retire if you don't do something you probably vegetate". This was reflected by the fact that all of the participants, including those who had used computers in the workplace, had been involved in some level of formal training since retirement. These were separated into three different categories; university, college, and distance learning. In addition five out of the 12 interviewees sited The University of the Third Age (U3A) as being of importance in their re-education. Although there was an inquisitive desire to continue or start learning after retirement, the main theme running through this group was their ability to rediscover and revisit a skill or interest they had experienced in earlier life, which had been restricted by

work. In most cases this was an aspiration to pursue areas associated with a creative practice such as art and photography, which inevitably led to a digitally created solution or digital facsimile of a physically created artefact. These learning experiences have in many cases given an introduction, no matter how rudimentary, into the digital environment. What follows are participants experiences of different types of post-retirement learning that has either led to or been directly associated with digital technology, the Internet and their ability to create and share content.

University

Three participants entered higher education for the first time after retirement. Two of the interviewees completed a BA in Fine Art after working in a non-creative occupation before retirement. Both expressed how the experience was rather challenging. Myra, age 71 when interviewed, who had had a career in the prison service, found that she drifted into university education.

Interviewer: What was your motivation for embarking on a university degree course?

Myra: I'd been involved in going to art classes over the years and never taken it seriously and then when I retired […] I thought it was rather nice to do an access course and when I was there the people said well an access course [leads] to university […] and with it I did an A level in Art and that led to me to apply to university and I did a part time course. It was more of a challenge than I'd anticipated.

Prior to her degree Myra joined a photographic group on Flickr taking photographs at different locations on London and uploads on a weekly basis. Similarly Peter, aged 85 at the time of interview, entered higher education upon retirement and after working in the motorcycle trade until his early 60s. He reignited his interest in art by first completing a Foundation Art course followed by Fine Art degree at university in 1990s.

Peter: I've always been interested in Art and whilst I've always visited galleries and museums I've never actually practices it until I retired from work about 25 years ago now at the age of 60-something. And at that time I went to a local comprehensive where the art teacher there who let me sit in with the students […] to do my GCSE and then later the next year continued to do my A levels and subsequently went on to University to do a degree in Fine Art. […] I really didn't really enjoy the degree course very much [as] it was a time of conceptual art [but] I continued and got my degree of course. But part of the education that I really enjoyed was the foundation course that you do before you go to university. (Oakley, 2012)

Peter's disappointing experience at university indirectly propelled him in the direction of computer art. Through a process of trial and error, he followed this by learning how to make videos using his Microsoft Window's Movie Maker.

Peter: Having given up art [after my unpleasant experience at art college] I thought that computer art might be an interesting thing to do. I had seen people at university in the very early days of computer art and I thought that might be something to occupy myself and I learned quite a bit about Photoshop and graphic design and […] was using some of those skills to do family slide shows which I thought were fairly boring and thought that video and audio would help them. [I] had to investigate how to make a video, which I knew nothing about at all, but [Microsoft] Windows Moviemaker was part of [my] operating system so that was another skill that I learned and then, having thought I was fairly clever at being able to deliver video, I found YouTube. I can't remember how. I think I was sort of texting either somebody on Skype or on another website and, having found YouTube, I thought it was a wonderful thing to do.

Peter had developed all these skills since his retirement and used them to full effect. In August 2006 he started uploading self-created videos diaries of personal monologues to YouTube with an account named Geriatric 1927, his date of birth[3]. He has since adopted the self-appointed title of 'Internet Grandad' (sic) and has become something of a celebrity on the platform. As of August 2012 he has developed a large following with 40,926 subscribers and 9,196,729 video views. Over the first six years of making videos for YouTube he has built an archive of 361 videos of which he posts, on average, a new one every week.

Bob's route to using digital technology was more incidental due to his interest in astronomy and Astro Photography, which he had developed in retirement. Astro Photography, like other forms of photography, has made the transition to digital in recent years and now involves using specialist software and digital cameras to take photographs of outer space through a telescope.

Bob: I did an astronomy course at University College London just when I retired and I thought I really need something to do now. I was already quite into the Astro Photography bit. So I did the course [for] two years got my diploma and it was very good and I learnt a lot.

For Bob to continue developing his interest in Astro Photography, it was essential that he purchase a computer.

Bob: I didn't have my own computer until about 2003, in fact, I've been rather nervous
            of computers up to then but because of my developing interest in astronomy I
            could see that I was going to have to use a computer [to continue Astro
            Photography]. So I just went and bought one without knowing much about what I
            was doing and sort of taught myself and asked people about it.

In this regard, Bob's previous reluctance to buy a computer was overcome and necessitated
by his pursuit and interest in Astro Photography, and his digital education gained from trial
and error.

College

Although there were a small amount of participants who enrolled on non-digital courses such
as drawing or painting, the majority in this age group used local colleges to provide support
and education of software and hardware. For example, they may learn the technical workings
of a digital camera, and then the software (e.g. Adobe Photoshop) and how they can be used
in conjunction with the web. Irene, aged 84 at the time of interview, began creating content
around 2005.

Irene: I started to go to the digital camera course first of all and the tutor there also
            taught Photoshop and said "Why don't you come along?". So I did a 10-week
            course but at the time I was having my cataracts done so I lost quite a lot of time
            and I was finding it difficult to see. […] I went [re]did [the Photoshop course] this
            year, [and] even though I'm three years older it sunk in more and I just seemed to
            understand it better. […]

However, some participants experienced a limitation to the options available and felt that
some of the courses that they had embarked were either too easy or too hard. Many
complained that there were not enough courses to cater for intermediate skills and many
courses either taught the basics or were too advanced. Consequently they were then left to
learn by themselves.

Carina: I'd like to improve [my web design skills]. Because one of the things we were
            asking at Harrow College is can we have an intermediate course on Dreamweaver.
            We can create websites and so we want to be able to do more things like video
            streaming and those sort of things on the web. […] The problem with the
            advanced one is that you have to go through a whole full-time course which we
            don't want that just to get the skills.

However, Carolyn, who attended a word-processing course at college back in 1997, expressed a frustration with some courses.

Interviewer: So where did you learn Photoshop then?

Carolyn: In my little room upstairs. (Laughs). I really learnt it myself. […] I did sign up for a [Photoshop] course about three years ago, which was a waste of money because it was so basic. […] I get books out of the library [and] I go onto the websites, forums. I'll ask questions if I don't know something. Usually someone comes back with the answer and there is so much on the web to actually learn. You can learn an awful lot and the YouTube tutorials are fantastic.

Carolyn has subsequently learnt more advanced Photoshop techniques through a process of 'trial and error'. The combination of her earlier use of technology and use of the web has helped her to develop self-learning methods through online forums and online resources such as YouTube.

Distance learning

Jill, a retired teacher, enrolled for an online course at the Open College of Art (OCA)[4] and found that this not only helped initiate her into digital photography but also introduced her to the practice of blogging and its associated community.

Jill: I did an OCA photography course and towards the end of that they were encouraging their students to do a blog as a learning record. I discovered blogging really as a way of communicating and recording my progress in photography but also then I realised I could upload other stuff. […] I'd spent quite a lot of time searching for different people who have similar interests. Then I realised there was this whole world of mainly women creating stuff and uploading it onto their blogs. So then I started scanning [my drawings] and putting them on too.

However, when she recently moved from using a PC to an Apple Macintosh she revealed how her use of technology as a teacher helped her when learning a new system.

Jill: I've taught myself the Apple and scanning stuff. I had to find how to do it through trial and error. I think one of the things about [teaching IT as] a primary school teacher [is that] you see the kids […] press every key together and they are all crashing and they all recover, you lose your inhibitions about making mistakes with the computer.

University of the Third Age (U3A)

U3A is a UK organisation and registered charity run by The Third Age Trust. In 2012 U3A celebrated it's 30th anniversary and, as of August 2012, was made up of 858 affiliated local groups with 293,733 members UK-wide. Their website describes the organisation as "self-help, self-managed lifelong learning co-operatives for older people no longer in full time work, providing opportunities for their members to share learning experiences in a wide range of interest groups and to pursue learning not for qualifications, but for fun" (The University of the Third Age, n.d.).

With the emphasis on learning for 'fun' and not qualifications, the U3A offers another avenue for gaining knowledge for this age group. Firstly it provides access to a wide range of subjects, which are discussed and presented at weekly meetings. There are classes that teach the technical aspects of digital technologies such as cameras and creating and using blogs. It offers a way of continued learning without the pressure of a working environment. U3A also provides courses and subjects that meet with the relevant requirements of this age group, namely the need to return to interests or talents that they had embraced before they had started work. Sheppy, aged 70 at the time of interview, is an active member of her local U3A.

Sheppy: I was very keen on art at school and I was very good at it but I couldn't continue [with it] in my working life and when I retired I joined U3A art class and started painting pictures.

This is a theme that is commonly found between interviewees. Indeed, there are many within this age group who were deterred or discouraged from following artistic or creative paths earlier in their careers often through parental pressure or institutional advice. They have chosen, therefore, to revisit these interests and re-educate themselves upon retirement.

One interviewee, Sue, had little knowledge of digital technology, but began taking digital photographs after completing a digital photography course at her local collage upon retiring (about six years ago). As a consequence of learning to use the camera, she bought her first computer and learnt Adobe Photoshop. Sue started taking digital photographs when she retired and bought a computer after buying her first digital camera.

Sue: At the age of 16, [I] thought of going to art college but I did science instead and then I became a therapist so I was very busy working and I didn't have any time to do art. When I retired I had the chance to go back to an interest I'd had in my teens. And then I joined a [photography] club and it became a social thing as well.

She has subsequently affiliated herself with groups such as the artists collective, *East Finchley Open*[5] and the online *London Independent Photographers Satellite Group*[6] along with publications such as *Highgate Wood newsletter*. Another participant, who was directed away for creative pursuits in her early life, was Julie, aged 77 when interviewed.

Julie: When I was 14 I wanted to become an artist. But then my father was very afraid of that profession and put me in a chemistry school where I had a lot less time.

Julie started using the Internet in the late 90s and up until retirement she had used the Internet mainly for research and search. On the discovery of digital photography and web media in the mid-2000s she has subsequently created three blogs, uses Flickr for her photos and Dailymotion to upload video.

Previous knowledge of computers in the workplace

The two eldest people in this group, aged in their mid 80s, retired before they could see or experience the use of computers in the workplace. However, seven of the sample used computers in a work establishment before retirement. Two of the interviewees learnt to use web-authoring software at their pre-retirement jobs as an IT specialist and a lecturer.

Carina: [I]n the 1990s, when I was lecturing at London Met[ropolitan University I began] to create web pages for WebCT and we also had in service training to use early versions of Dreamweaver. […] WebCT was a means whereby my lecture notes were put on the University server for students [to] download, and for students to upload their projects. Those were the sort[s] of things I was doing then.

Sheppy: At work, I learnt how to update websites. To start off with I didn't understand what they were but at work I learnt how you updated them, so once I had taken on the job as webmaster I bought Dreamweaver, which I find to be very good, and I just started to use that. It started at work but it's continued since then. […] I think the reason I got online so easily is because I ended up working for IBM and I was so used to PCs and laptops and Windows so I just sort of fell into it. I can understand there's a lot of people my age who are absolutely terrified of computers because it's not part of their culture but it was part of mine. So, I thank my lucky stars it was.

Sheppy's observation exemplifies the advantages in learning computer skills at work and before retirement. This has a distinct advantage as it prevents them from having to embark on the steep learning curve of computer basics and makes it easier to take up more advanced and specific computer skills in retirement.

Online communication

One of the benefits deriving from the introduction and development of digital and Internet skills for this group has been the ability to connect and communicate with likeminded people online irrespective of location. Participants were asked whether creating content and sharing it through online media had helped communicate with other people.

Peter communicates regularly with many subscribers to his YouTube channel. He now spends much of time communicating with some of his 40,000 YouTube channel subscribers. In effect Peter +65 has developed friendships from all around the world through his online presence and uploaded content. He, therefore, conducts most of this communication through online media.

Peter: From my own point of view I think it's absolutely wonderful because through it I have made many, many genuine nice friends. And it's nice through the medium of Skype and places to be able to communicate.

Seven of the twelve participants were living alone when the interviews were conducted. Many spoke of how using online communications and sharing their content has helped them feel less alone. The following quotes give a nuanced observation of how two people regard the use of online media combat the feeling of loneliness. Julie believes the impact of sharing her content with other web users as has helped combat her feelings of loneliness.

Julie: I am less alone and I can share what I create and I can discover other works and they can discover me and I can pass on what I believe.

Sheppy sees her friends being divided between those who still use traditional and slow forms of communication like postal mail and others that communicate with her via the Internet.

Sheppy: I just feel closer to people. I'm retired. I live on my own. I've got some friends, complete luddites, they won't get on the Internet or anything and I have to snail mail them. And I don't keep in much good contact with them. But other people who are into all this new technology, I'm in contact with them every day. And you don't feel alone. You just feel as if the whole world's there and it's there for the taking.

Indeed, Sheppy makes a clear differentiation between the perceived technological deficiencies of her offline friends and regular communications made with online ones that make her feel

'closer' to them. The implication here is that digital technology has become more important as her main form of communication and one to which she has become more reliant.

Another area of importance in retirement was health and its associated links. Health was a concern with some participants either through personal health issues or through restricted mobility brought about by their own or their partner's illness. In some cases the Internet has been a lifeline to the outside world or as Jill describes "another world".

Jill +65:   The two things [retirement and the internet] came together. I don't think I would have done anywhere near [as much in retirement] without the Internet. That was my door to the world. My husband had a stroke 14 years ago and we were a bit limited in our range of outdoor activities so I don't get out perhaps as much as I would like so I was very much at home. So this is very much a window to another world.

From this standpoint the use of digital technologies and the Internet can be arguably viewed as an empowering medium for this age group. Not only does it enable the reconnection to pre-retirement interests or discovery of new ones, as discussed above, it also makes inclusive communications possible from positions of relative physical isolation. For some participants it has enabled a two-way connection with a wider community through discussion or interest in their shared content.

6.0 Conclusion and discussion

One of the main criticisms arising from comparisons and differentiation between people in pre-defined generational groups is that standardised assumptions are made about how they behave and their ability to learn. Indeed, Mannheim's theory implies that a generational consciousness within a generation is not necessary homogenous or coherent as there may be distinctive division within a generation with divergent views or practices that take the form of 'generation units'. David Kertzer sees research using generations to observe social behaviour as potentially problematic. He argues that merely using generational groups to distinguish significant differences between the values of the younger and older generations "offers us no means of knowing whether to attribute these differences to life-course effects or to permanent cohort characteristics" (Kertzer, 1983:131).

As the web has become more pervasive the distinction made between 'digital natives' and 'digital immigrants' and the concepts of a 'digital' or 'net' generation appear outmoded. These terms ignore the many considerations needed to understand how individuals of

different ages with varying educational and socio-economic backgrounds learn and use digital technology and web media. David Buckingham argues that, "the notion of a digital generation – a generation defined through its relationship with a particular technology or medium – clearly runs the risk of attributing an all-powerful role to technology" (Buckingham, 2006:11). Technological advancement affects and is affected by people of all ages in different ways and is dependent on many factors, not just age or association with a generation. Indeed, within the numbers of retired Internet users there is a diversity of knowledge, use and activity that is equal in many ways with other age groups. Included in this are a small, but noteworthy proportion of digital content creators and publishers. These are Internet users that display neither a model of tech-savvy 'silver surfer' or 'digital dismissive' but show a variety of diverse backgrounds, interests and abilities. As with the small representative sample of participants in this article, they display many different experiences and knowledge of technology. Career experiences, access to technologies and education, have all played a part in how and why they participate in the practice of creating and sharing digital content.

It is evident from the interviews conducted here that many older people are comfortable with and have an aptitude for the use and learning of digital technology and web media. It must also be noted that, for the over 65s, acquiring skills to use digital technologies are often unintentional or as a consequence of adopting a new hobby or interest in retirement. For several, learning digital is a gradual and necessary requirement for them to pursue their hobbies. For example, for participant Sheppy, it is something that she "just fell into" or like participant Myra a natural progression. This may have originated as a non-digital hobby but through the gradual adoption of technologies within these practices has become part of the process of engagement in the hobby.

Knowledge and understanding of technology varies greatly in the over-65s and is multi-faceted, as with all age groups. What the participants' have revealed about adopting digital technology for creating and sharing content has been four fold.

1. Participants were self-initiated in their uptake of post-retirement education. This enabled them to acquire skills necessary to rediscover and explore interests they were unable to partake earlier in life. This may have been due to constraints of working, family life or through being discouraged at an early age by family members or institutions.

2. For several, post-retirement education helps extend or transfer physical world interests they are already engaged in, such as painting or drawing, to a digital form.

3. For several, introduction to the digital domain was an unintended consequence of education and came via an interest in subjects such as photography or astronomy, where introduction to digital technology or software was necessary for successful completion and progression.

4. For several, knowledge attained from formal education has led them to adopt 'trial and error' learning as a way to gain a higher proficiency of digital technology.

In light of these findings it is evident that many over 65s are using digital media not merely to engage in a process of information gathering, but are expressing themselves through sharing self-created content. The outcomes challenge the association between old age and lack of Internet engagement. Whatever the type or complexity of digital content created by the over 65s their use of digital media now encompasses production as well as consumption. There is also evidence of participants in this article, particularly participant Peter, projecting their identities into the digital space and of their online and offline activities beginning to merging. This is in-line with the White and de Cornu 'resident' maxim (2011).

While suggesting that there is a need for less generational comparisons there is also a need to recognise that using the Internet has specific issues for the over 65s that are not necessarily relevant to younger people. Retired people may have more free time to learn digital media but there are also issues of health, mobility, accessibility, physical isolation and loneliness that can be combatted through online connections and communication. There are already many organisations in the UK that are taking initiatives to address these issues, including AgeUK, Age Concern and Help the Aged, but more needs to be done to harness the networking potential and array of communication channels available.

Consequently, future initiatives should consider the diverse backgrounds and experiences of older people and the many different ways they can be introduced to digital media and the Internet. These should recognise the diversity of skill, learning ability and motivation to adopt and use digital technology. In focusing less on presumptions of how a certain generational group may act and more on their motivation for a wide variety of interests and practices, we may be able to develop educational programmes, policies, design systems and devices that are better suited to the needs of all older people and, indeed, all age groups.

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[1] See: http://raceonline2012.org

[2] See: http://www.u3a.org.uk

[3] See: http://www.youtube.com/user/geriatric1927

[4] See: http://www.oca-uk.com/

[5] See: http://www.eastfinchleyopen.org.uk

[6] See: http://www.londonphotography.org.uk/satellites/