

Communications Technology and Getting Older

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For over twenty years I have been a member of an ageing men's group, a group of anti-sexist, radical thinking older men who want to age better and help others to do likewise. During that time, technology has moved on apace – as have we of course – though not always in step with that technology. While some of our group have managed to adapt advantageously to technological changes, others have not. Instead, like so many of our peers, they have found these challenging and have at times found themselves, like Muggles at Hogwarts, looking on bewildered as all this dazzling wizardry unleashes its powerful magic all around them.

Effective communications technology is a lifeline for our group. For many years emails and phone calls sufficed well for our purposes and kept us in touch with one another, especially where we were able to send round useful attachments. Just as important has been our continuing ability to drive and share transport, given that we are spread over such a wide area. Then, gradually, if falteringly, we started to use the mobile phone, though only ever for calls, seldom if ever for texting between ourselves or for sharing other media.

When Covid struck, some of us were already in our eighties and we no longer had the option to continue to meet face-to-face, forcing us to become heavily dependent upon modern technology in order to keep in touch. We toyed at first with Skype, and then with Zoom, and this actually enabled us to meet as a group much more often than we used to. But some have found this difficult and continue to do so. Meetings now are sometimes missed as someone finds they cannot connect, and one member will not use Zoom at all, preferring to wait until we can all meet face-to-face again. Others rely heavily upon their partners to help them to stay connected. One member, recently predeceased, has lost this critical support at a time when he needs, more than ever, to keep up his continuing contact with others.

Similar issues are commonplace among others in our age group – in various U3A¹ groups for example – as they strive in the same ways to adapt to complex modern technology. Many older people are seriously struggling with modern communications technology and, it seems, without much by way of sympathy and help from the younger generation.

¹ University of the Third Age.

It is tempting to think of ours as being an ‘age of technology’, given the extent to which it now governs our lives, but this would be a misnomer; for countless millennia – ever since we learned how to use crude tools – we have lived in an age of the latest technology of one kind or another, whether that be spears sharpened in the fire or the latest iPhone. Equally, as people have grown old, they have found themselves unable to use this technology quite so effectively as they once had. And, in those situations where some kind of retirement was an option, people may have given up using their particular work technology and skills altogether during the time that they had left to them.

But today, and especially in ‘westernised’ cultures, retirement/old age has become not only an option but a greatly extended period in our lives, very often spanning several decades. During this time many older people continue to live productive and useful lives, and yet find themselves having to rely upon ever more complex technology in order to remain in touch with family and peers, to remain productive, and for their continuing quality of life.

Such, in fact, has become the intensity of our modern relationship with technology that we appear now to have moved into an age of *technofetishism* where, as Marshall McLuhan would have put it, the medium really does seem to have become the message, particularly for the young. This mindset has been driving technical innovation relentlessly and to such dizzying heights that, over the course of more than a century, the technology itself – rather than the products of that technology – has increasingly become fetishised and commoditised to the point where it becomes desirable in its own right. From the Model T Ford to the iPhone 13, the technology seems to have become, for many, an *end* in itself, and not so much the *means* to some other end.

In the current situation, those who do not, or cannot, or cannot afford to keep up with the pace of technological advance, now risk becoming alienated from those who can afford it, and who can and do keep up. And those who can and do are primarily the younger generation of working age, which includes all those of lesser years upon whom older people depend so much for their continuing quality of life and wellbeing. In short, the world that the younger generation has created for us is one in which we are forced to become increasingly tech-savvy just in order to keep going at all.

One clear example of this is that, unless you own a smart phone, and unless that smart phone is an up-to-date model (which can be very expensive) – and unless you know how to use it effectively – you cannot take advantage of the current Covid app to help keep yourself and others safe. Furthermore, as vulnerable older people become locked down, medical consultations are taking place more and more over the telephone or online, via the computer or tablet, so that, once again, those who do not have the adequate technology, and the know-how and the skills, become easily bewildered and risk becoming socially and medically disadvantaged.

Many of the difficult issues that older people face nowadays with modern communications technology is, I would suggest, down to the fact that it is mostly designed by the young for the young (I remain mindful of the fact that it was my generation – the ‘Sinclair Generation’ – who kicked this whole process off). Where, for example, are all the computers and the smart phones designed specifically for the needs of older people in order to help them to continue to communicate effectively and easily, and to help them to cope better with the complex demands of our modern world? The answer is that, apart from a few limited exceptions, they simply do not exist. Even hearing aid technology now relies heavily on smart phone technology in order to be able to use it properly, and many older people are simply not in command (or possession) of the latest, expensive smart phone technology to make this possible.

This ‘*neocratic turn*’, where the younger generation drive on progress largely for their own needs, is increasingly consigning older people to the sidelines of our society and alienating them from everyday life. And, as if this isn’t enough of a problem, that confusing technology is all-too-often being used to their detriment as scammers and other scoundrels use the very same technology to prey upon them, emptying their bank accounts and stealing their life savings.

In order to avoid this happening we are told constantly to keep changing our passwords, that they should be as complex as possible, and not to use the same password over again. Nor should we use anything obvious or traceable back to our personal lives. At a time when, for many of us, our memories are not as sharp as they once were, this can quickly produce such a bewildering and ever-shifting array of passwords and user names that they become impossible to remember or keep abreast of, thus scuppering our online activities for us even before we get started. If we write them all down we, once again, put our security at risk. All this technology, which is supposed to be making our lives so much easier and more

efficient, soon becomes an impossible nightmare of confusion and frayed tempers that occupies more and more of what time we have left in simply trying to keep it working at all.

In fact, the older generation are not the only ones to be put at risk. To build on an my earlier argument, modern technological developments – to the extent that they may be seen as being a means to any kind of end at all – have actually contributed to a hugely-profitable culture of narcissism among the younger generation, creating a heavy dependency on the latest wizardry, not only to keep in touch, but in order to remain at all contented with oneself. Smart phone/social media technology has developed way beyond its initial function as a more effective and attractive means of communication; like the wicked queen in Snow White, it has become, in effect, a magic mirror by means of which we can seek out constant affirmation from others to the effect that we are valued and favoured by them. Ultimately, we come to need and depend upon those others to reflect back to us a positive and desirable self-image.

Self psychologists such as Heinz Kohut, writing about narcissism, have referred to this usage of others as the '*selfobject*'², someone upon whom a person may come to depend profoundly for their sense of self-worth. These days, 'staying connected' or – to be more exact – not being connected becomes a modern-day existential dread in which young people gradually find themselves frightened of becoming alone and locked in with their inner sense of worthlessness and shame, a scenario which has been blatantly exploited by advertisers of smart phones. By way of amplifying and exploiting this dread, advertisers bombard us constantly with images of groups of happy, smiling, attractive young people, all having great fun in each other's company, using their smart phones to take selfies, dancing and singing and the like. Conversely, and more worryingly, this same technology has also become the means by which people can project these very same fears into others through acts of ostracism, online bullying and persecution, sometimes resulting in social isolation and even depression and suicide.

² See Kohut, H., (1971), *The Analysis of the Self: A Systematic Approach to the Psychoanalytic Treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorders*. New York, International Universities Press; (1977), *The Restoration of the Self*. New York, International Universities Press. While Kohut, here, is concerned primarily with certain types of narcissistic 'personality disorder', narcissistic processes *as such* do not necessarily point to a disorder but ordinarily extend, in varying degrees, into our everyday lives as well.

The contrast between these kinds of social usage among the younger generation and our own is stark and revealing. For those who develop and market this technology it is immediately clear where most of the money is to be made. The likes of Bill Gates, Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg have not made their billions through any deep and driving desire to create a technology that will improve and enhance the lives and the wellbeing of a largely redundant older generation. In technological terms, we are the ‘hangers-on’, doing the best we can with a bewildering range of technology that was designed primarily for others and which, all too often, is not even keeping pace with itself. In order to keep abreast of it you have somehow to stay ahead of the game, familiarise yourself with the most up-to-date information, spend the big bucks, and then end up paying someone to help you to make sense of it all and keep it working.

Now, to add to our lot, we have slipped inexorably into a strange world of ‘*technodosh*’, where life becomes rapidly even more difficult for those who are not bang up-to-date with the technology. As banks and cashpoint machines disappear like shipwrecked rats from our high streets, paying for anything by cash is becoming all the more problematic. In Sweden, I found recently that even the most everyday items, such as a loaf of bread or a glass of orange juice, could not be bought using cash. Now I don’t even have to bother putting my debit card into the machine, let alone remembering my tiresome pin number; I simply wave the card like a magic wand at a machine and the item is automatically paid for and my account debited. Now, even this has become ‘old-tech’ as my smart phone does it all for me instead. No phone; no card; I become almost a pariah on the high street. I don’t think this is overstating the case; for the old, the disabled, the technologically-unable, accessing your bank account at all can be a significant problem. After a long time in lockdown, and being asthmatic, so avoiding the shops, I would find myself hard-pressed now even to describe our currency to anyone.

In short, the future has arrived. Whether or not we see this as Orwellian is not my point; everything (minus, perhaps, the silver suits) has crept up upon us surreptitiously, straight from the pages of science fiction. We can pay for a quick jolly into space (if we have the money of course) and we have stun guns and ray guns, communicators and synchronised watches of which Captain Kirk himself might have been envious: gizmos that measure our heart-rate and blood pressure

on the go; that count the number of steps we take – including up and down stairs; that pay for everything we need; that transmit instant video conversations around the globe; that tell me where I am – and where my car is, and how to get where I want to be, as well as when to leave, and so on, and so on, almost *ad infinitum*. No wonder it is confusing; it has become almost a full-time occupation just trying to keep up with it all.

So I sign off from my computer, that has automatically checked my spelling and my grammar, and will even read this document back to me if I so wish. And should you want to read it in another language – no problem at all; I will simply press another button and instantly it will be so.

And here is a thought to leave you with, presuming you are reading this by electronic means: Does this document actually exist?