# Past the Post:
## Older People and New Technology

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INTRODUCTION

This is a report about a medium that is new and a generation that is ageing. That in itself is unusual: most studies of the new media are concerned with patterns of use by young people. There tends to be an almost automatic cultural association between new media and youth culture: grannies and grandads are not supposed to have walkmans, mobile phones or e-mail addresses, less still to surf the net. But of two things we can be sure: new media do not remain new forever and young people do not remain young forever. If the internet is to become a mature medium, like radio and television, it will have to be attractive and usable to everyone. This useful report explores the prospects of that happening.

The internet has been over-sold. The IT rhetoric – a combination of sharp selling and technocracy – has emphasised the gee-whizziness of the technology. The internet has been promoted as if it is complete. It would be like someone standing in front of a flickering black and white TV screen in the 1950s and saying ‘This is television in all its glory. This is the accessible technology. This is the great content. Take it as it is.’ Had television not evolved it would never have become the ubiquitous, domesticated, social medium that it is. Many more mature users of the internet ask difficult questions that discomfort the e-evangelists: Why is it so difficult to use? Why do computers keep breaking down? Why is it so hard to find useful content? What’s in it for me?

There are answers to these questions, but the constant repetition of the mantra, ‘The world is changing. We are now all living in an information age’, says too much and nothing at all. The first answer is that the internet is incomplete. It should be regarded as a work in progress. And if progress is to be real it should be democratic: IT designers and new media content producers should be listening to the widest range of voices, including the millions of people who are older citizens. Secondly, the internet needs to broaden its content. A medium based upon online shopping, government transactions and banking might be hugely convenient, but what does it add to the quality of society? The internet should be used to empower people.

Like the internet, democracy needs to evolve. Radio and television had a profound effect, for better and for worse, on the nature and conduct of democratic politics. So did the printing press a few centuries earlier. The possibility of the internet is that it can facilitate a more interactive democracy in which governance is as much about people giving their accounts as politicians accounting to the people. For this to work, the voices of all, and not just a few, of the people need to be heard. If the internet is to be a democratic medium of communication, then access to it should be as universal as access to telephones, writing paper and polling booths.

The value of this report is that it does not run away from the problems. Many older users of the internet are confused and frustrated by it; this calls for more user-friendly technology and better training. There is also an important need to regard the internet as a choice and not a requirement.

This report stems from an interesting online consultation conducted for an all-party parliamentary group by the Hansard Society on the subject of long-term care. It is to be hoped that the views and experiences of long-term care services will inform parliamentarians. But there is a message here for the internet as well: it requires long-term care if it is to mature into something that is not only very new and exciting, but also very enriching and empowering.

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CHAPTER ONE
Outline of the report

The central question of this research is of how technology affects older people’s political engagement and participation. Our understanding of the political, in this context, refers to decisions and actions which relate to the UK parliamentary system of representative democracy, including the smaller scale of local government.

Our definition of ‘participation’ refers to discussion, deliberation and debate, rather than any physical or economic processes. Because of the ‘remote’ nature of the research, which takes a web site as its starting-point, the activity that we are able to observe is verbal and written. From their speech and written words, we look to see whether participants discuss political issues in a way that reveals that they draw a connection between these issues and their own lives. Following Habermas’ consideration of deliberation as a vital part of the political process we look at how communication, both within and between different sections of the population, forms political engagement.

Our target research group is ‘older people’, which, following the practice of Age Concern’s computer training, we defined as anyone over the age of 55. There are various definitions of ‘old’ to choose between, including the UK retirement age of 60 for women and 65 for men, but we offered as broad a span as possible in order to investigate what differences would emerge within this group.

General methodology

Much recent research of a more quantitative bent considers issues of numbers of internet users, cost barriers, and the changing state of the technology (eg Aldridge, 1998)ii

Our aim is to take a qualitative approach, thereby obtaining a less generalised but more nuanced understanding of people’s behaviour and attitudes. This research combines our observations of the target group’s behaviour with their own explanations of what they are doing and thinking. The UK Government’s Better Government for Older People’s research projectiii highlighted the importance in the social policy context of working with rather than for older people, while a growing strand of gerontology research considers the benefits of providing a forum for older people to speak for themselvesiv.

This research does not aim to be representative of all older people. We learnt from a small number of participants, who fell within the group of ‘people with access to a computer’, and we are aware that this group is itself only a small minority of all older people. We are working towards a fuller understanding of why and how a few individuals behave, because it is only with this fine-grained understanding that sense can be made of the broader picture.

A trend throughout this research was to cast our net broadly in terms of who was looked at and what aspects of them were examined. This stems from the fact that the area of qualitative research on older people’s political engagement using computer technology has not been extensively examined, and we are trying to identify conceptually important themes that will be useful to future investigation and policy work.

Context: older people, technology and politics

Older people and younger people use technology, and engage in politics, in as many and as various ways as there are users.

To offer some background figures on older people and computers, figures from the Office of National Statistics Omnibus Survey show that at July 2002, 57% of adults in Britain had ever accessed the internet. Of those in the 55 to 64 year-old age bracket, 44% had used the internet, as had 14% of those aged 65 and over.v This is from within a population of 58.8 million (as at the 2001 census), of whom 9.1 million are in the 55 – 65 age bracket, 6.9 million in the 65 – 79 age bracket, and 2.4 million in the 80+ age bracket. In total, 31% of the UK population are aged 55 and over.vi

Older people use technology in different ways from each other. A survey carried out by Age Concern England and ICM in July 2002vii reports that men use internet technology to gather information while women talk to each other. 36% of the over-55s whom they surveyed had used the internet, with 11% having used it to contact a local MP or councillor; 7% to visit a chat room; 41% to check the news and 82% to contact friends or family.
As for older people’s political engagement, the over-65s are the age demographic who vote in general elections in the highest proportions. And what of those who are voted for? The mean average age for MPs in Westminster is 49.83 years, with the modal average age in the 50-59 age bracket, while 12% are in their 60s and 1.5% over 70, as illustrated here: viii

The mean average age of members of the House of Lords is 67 years. It was a frequent comment from older people who rang the Hansard Society to enquire about the Seniorspeak project that they would like there to be more representatives in Parliament of the same, older age bracket.

Long-term care: a case study in online discussion

This issue of older people’s participation, then, as seen through discussion, is the object of our research. Discussion cannot exist just as a form, however; it requires content, and for the content of the online consultation that forms one part of this research, we selected the issue of long-term care.

There are currently several projects which consider various aspects of older people, health and engagement. To gain an idea of this context, one might look at the telephone service NHS Direct, and the web-based projects NHS Direct Online and CAREdirect, ix which use telephone and internet technology to offer information on services to older people. These are all delivery services of information on care, rather than projects encouraging active discussion or input from older users.

The ESRC and MRC-funded Innovative Health Technologies Programme x takes as its central question, ‘How will people and society be affected by, and in turn affect, innovative health technologies?’ This broadens the question into consideration of the internet as used not just for delivery but as a means for people to take action concerning their own health.

The voluntary website Fax Your MP xi offers an information and enabling service based on the premise that it is right and proper to assist people in participating in the democratic process. It makes an apposite use of available technology (fax, web site and interactive television) for enabling communication. It also illustrates the effectual power of communication within a peer group (the organisers), followed by communication to a different, less technologically competent section of the public (the users), to bring about communication between users and their MPs.

In February 2002, the BBC held a dedicated ‘NHS day’, during which they conducted a national poll on what was the most pressing issue for the NHS. Voting by telephone and on a web site, viewers selected long-term care, showing that when provided with a forum offering slight interaction and plentiful information, members of the public show a concern for this topic.xii

The Fife User Panels are five offline forums run by Age Concern Scotland. Each panel meets once a month, bringing together up to eight people aged between 70 and 97 who use care services. Meeting locally face-to-face, the panel discuss their views and concerns within a safe and supportive environment, and their views inform the work of local agencies and service providers.xiii

These projects each touch on one element of this research, but none considers the particular conjunction of issues that forms the basis for this research.

Report outline

This report is in two parts. The first is a description of an online consultation that we ran, using a website to gather comments on the topic of discussion. Because we designed and ran the online consultation, there was an element of intervention in this part of the research. We were not observing people functioning in their own environments, but were constructing a new arena and encouraging participants to use it. The online consultation both provided a space for discussion, and allowed us to investigate the process of becoming
involved in this discussion. This observation was carried out remotely, via the website itself and by telephone, rather than face-to-face. As such, it relied on two strands: the behaviour of participants as manifested in their participation, and their own words.

The second part of the report consists of case studies from visits paid to older people by the author of this report, Melissa McCarthy, as they learnt how to use computers. During these visits, older learners talked about long-term care but also explained their views on computers and on political engagement. They also demonstrated attitudes towards computers that they would not have described, requiring the researcher to observe and interpret.

Both parts of the research, then, involve discussion and observation, but in different measures. The very fact that there are two elements embodies one of the central questions of the research:

What is different about engagement when it is over a distance, enabled by technology, from when it is carried out in the physical presence?

And the milieu of the research prompts the other primary question:

Can we conclude that there are distinctive characteristics of 'older people' as a group, that affect their political engagement?
CHAPTER TWO
Why online consultations?

The core of the first part of research was a project that we ran from 14 June to 31 July 2002, an online consultation called Seniorspeak. It was promoted as Seniorspeak – an online consultation on long-term care, putting older people, families, carers and health and social care professionals in touch with MPs and MSPs.

What is an online consultation?

The format of the online consultation has been used in the e-democracy research programme of the Hansard Society several times since 2000 to examine a range of topics including domestic violence, working family tax credits, stem cell research and flooding. An online consultation (in our context) is a process of asking a specific group (physically dispersed but sharing some defining characteristics) to put forward and share their views and experiences on a particular matter by means of a web site. The discussion generated in this way informs the work of policy-makers, specifically a group of participating MPs who are concerned with the topic of the consultation.

We use the terminology that the ‘consultation’ is the whole process of setting up the site, encouraging people to use it, reporting on it and acting after it, while the ‘discussion’ consists only of the messages posted onto the web site by people taking part. A ‘participant’ is anyone who has registered for the consultation and is thus able to take part in the discussion by reading and posting messages. Participants can choose to read or post as many messages as they like, or none.

The web site is the visible manifestation of the online consultation, consisting of informational pages that anyone can read, and the password-protected discussion area, which only participants, who have registered via the site or over the telephone, can enter. The discussion area uses a standard software application for asynchronous message posting, which allows participants to access the discussion from any computer at any time. They are free to respond to any message or post their own at any time.

The online discussion is moderated, with guidelines for acceptable use published on the site. The moderator is able to edit or remove any message after it has been posted (but not before), and to block a participant from accessing the site.

At the close of a consultation, the moderator makes a summary of all of the discussion, highlighting points that received particular attention and presenting information about the postings in a condensed and shaped format. Participants are also encouraged to complete an exit survey, which asks how they felt about the consultation and their participation in it.

Who takes part?

For each topic, there is a particular group of people who are targeted to take part in the consultation, because of their personal experience and knowledge of the topic. These people can be geographically located anywhere, but their common bond is the fact that the topic is of interest and relevance to them. In addition to these members of the public, certain policy-makers take part in each consultation, because their work involves the topic and they are interested in the potential of this format.

Participants in one consultation can have different status in relation to the topic under consideration. An MP in a committee investigating long-term care has a different relation to the topic than does a resident in a care home, and a medical professional stands in a different relation than do both of the former, yet all of these individuals can participate in the consultation. And, of course, different individuals of the same status can hold views that differ greatly from each other. The aim of a consultation is not to gain a representative survey of views, but to build up a body of discussion in this new format that can be examined in a qualitative way.

To take part in an online consultation, one needs access to a computer and a desire to join in. In this sense, participation is limited. In some consultations, we have worked with computer providers and trainers to introduce potential participants to the technology and thus enable them to take part. In some cases this has not been possible and we have only had the input of people with existing access.
What does the online consultation offer?

The online consultation offers participants a forum for discussion, and provides an experimental, unusually intimate setting for this debate.

Participating MPs, like all participants, can use the site to read and post messages. They are also presented with the content of the discussion in summarised form, either during the running time of the consultation or afterwards. In this way the consultation provides them with experiences and opinions from members of the public to which they would not otherwise be party. They also have the opportunity to experience at first-hand how new forms of technology can be a part of their parliamentary work.

To members of the public, the online consultation offers both a forum for discussion, and an assurance that their views are being presented to politicians. There is no guarantee that this will lead to any action, or that the politicians will read or respond to every message. What the research is able to facilitate is a commitment from the participating politicians to engage in debate about the particular topic to a certain extent, and to consider this method of communication and the information so gathered.

The open access area of the web site offers information on the topic, accessible also to those who do not register for the discussion. The online consultation offers researchers a mine of information. The technology of the consultation brings in its wake certain conceptual points that should be discussed before looking at the particular process and results of the Seniorspeak consultation.

The technology

The discussion area in our consultations uses WebBoard software, a fixed format which allows registered users to read and post messages. To post a message, a participant clicks on this option and writes their message, choosing where the message is stored in the index of messages. The message can be previewed and altered until the participant is happy to post it, at which point it is straight away publicly available for all participants to read and respond to. Each message is attributed to the person posting it, and although participants are able
to alter the name by which the software refers to them, none of them in *Seniorspeak* expressed any desire not to have a proper name by their message. The software is meant automatically to keep each participant’s e-mail address inaccessible to all other users except the moderator, but during *Seniorspeak* it failed to do so and the moderator manually hid each e-mail address from public view.

Using this particular technology allows anyone to participate in the consultation, at any time and from any location, with the only necessity being a computer with internet access. It allows participants to access it at any time and to go at their own pace, unlike live chat. In some senses, this enables all participants to join in on the same terms, although personal characteristics are not obliterated by the technology. An individual’s confidence, eloquence, argumentativeness and style of expression all persist into the discussion.

**Conceptual aspects of online consultation**

**Collectiveness** Online consultation works on a model of collectiveness, in that all participants must gather in the same area, unlike using an e-mail distribution method in which every message is circulated to every participant’s own computer. One might use a physical metaphor that is indicated in the language of online discussion (forum and message-board), to say that the discussion brings people to the same communal place. We did use a distributional model to send out weekly updates.

**Presence on the part of a moderator** The technology also allows for a certain amount of presence on the part of a moderator, which offered reassurance over who was taking part and how they used the web site. Participants knew about the registration system from having gone through it themselves. It was meant to provide a feeling of security, in that malicious users might be discouraged by the effort of registering from using the consultation, and by our welcoming but serious tone.

**Small scale** The consultation works on a relatively small scale, as dictated by practical constraints. In theory any number of participants could take part, but in practice an extremely large number of postings would be too time-consuming to read and difficult to navigate. The consultation is also closely-focused in terms of being directed at a particular topic, and in being condensed into a short amount of time, which was six weeks in the case of *Seniorspeak*.

**Personal experience** An online consultation creates a new forum for discussion of a topic, discussion between a range of individuals, most of whom will have personal experience of the topic. In this sense we are looking at scale, at how to move between the individual and the central policy in a relationship that involves explanation. The individual can vote every election, but there is no depth of dialogue in this. By providing a space for the individual to use their own words and to back up their argument in their own way (within limits that we set), we are looking at whether a whole better grade of discussion emerges. The next step to investigate, of course, is whether better discussion leads to better decisions and outcomes.

**Process** The consultation also allows the researchers to consider the process of discussion and debate. We do a small amount of discourse analysis, looking at who spoke and how they interacted. A more detailed discussion of the tone of discussion and the environment of the *Seniorspeak* consultation follows in the next chapter.

**Concentrated examination** It is important to remember that the online consultation uses new technology to consider a topic of discussion, and also to gather feedback on that technology itself. The process of consultation is not geared solely to looking at the technology, however, because it also calls for a particular level of involvement from the politicians and the public. By running a consultation for a short period of time and ensuring the participation of MPs, the consultation provides a concentrated examination, which, for most of the time and in most contexts of political engagement, is simply not there. The level of interest and involvement that the politicians pledge to invest in the consultation ensures that consultations can only be experiments, albeit experiments that have the potential to inform and prompt alterations in the processes of engagement.
CHAPTER THREE

The Seniorspeak online consultation

The previous chapter outlined what an online consultation is and why it is a useful method of investigation. Here we discuss the core of our research, the Seniorspeak online consultation which ran from 14 June to 31 July 2002, at the web site www.seniorspeak.org.

The target group of participants

The target group of participants for Seniorspeak consisted of older people, their families, carers, and professionals in the fields of health and social care. The topic of discussion was long-term care, and within this topic the discussion was divided into the following categories:

- Your Experiences of Care;
- Nursing Care and Personal Care (this refers to an administrative distinction drawn between certain tasks);
- Costs of Care;
- Delayed Discharge (when a person is medically well enough but unable to leave a hospital bed because follow-up care is unavailable);
- Regulation of Care.

The main politicians who agreed to participate in the consultation were Eddie O’Hara MP, the Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Ageing and Older People in the Westminster Parliament, and Sandra White MSP, Convenor of the Cross-Party Group on Older People, Age and Ageing in the Scottish Parliament. Both politicians agreed to their pictures and a message of support being published on the web site, and they expressed interest in the content and the process of the consultation. Neither had taken part in a Hansard Society online consultation before, and they both agreed that the consultation might be useful in informing the work of their groups. They made no commitment to how much time or attention they could give to the consultation. In promoting the consultation to the MPs we were helped by the parliamentary officers supporting each group. In Edinburgh, an employee of Age Concern Scotland supports the Cross-Party Group, while in Westminster an Age Concern England employee provides support for the All-Party Group. Particularly in Westminster, the parliamentary officer was good at mentioning the Seniorspeak consultation at each All-Party Group meeting, encouraging other group members to take part, and circulating weekly updates among the group.

Primary partners

The major charity Age Concern England (ACE) were our primary partners in Seniorspeak. Their incentive to collaborate on the project was that these issues of older people’s care, computer use and education, and involvement in debates relating to policy are obviously within their remit. We decided on the topic of the consultation through discussion with an ACE policy officer, and worked with the parliamentary officer for liaison with the All-Party Group. We worked with their Project Manager for IT and Older People in devising the site, reaching potential participants and visiting other computer training schemes. ACE’s media relations arm helped to publicise the consultation to the public, while the ACE web site alerted computer-users to the consultation. ACE is the central federation of local branches of Age Concern throughout England, all of which were told of the consultation.

In addition to branches of Age Concern, there are 54 Age Resource Desks throughout England and Scotland, which were also alerted to the consultation. An Age Resource Desk, often located in the offices or shop of a local branch of Age Concern, provides computer equipment and training to older people, aiming to introduce new technology in a friendly environment.

Age Concern England thereby helped to shape and promote the consultation, and the involvement of their extremely well-known and trusted name offered an assurance to participants of the trustworthiness of the project.

Publicity

We also benefited greatly from the involvement of Help the Aged, another major charity, who publicised the consultation to their network of older campaigners and activists. Both these charities are member of the Right
to Care Coalition, which campaigns for changes to the system of care for older people. Other organisations which publicised Seniorspeak on their web sites with either an article or a listing included: the National Pensioners Convention; Seniors Network, an independent activism site; the University of the Third Age; the Society section of the Guardian; and other community sites.

The co-ordinating body for UK online centres publicised Seniorspeak in its newsletter which is sent to staff at the 6,000 centres. In print media, articles about Seniorspeak appeared in the Salvation Army newsletter and local papers.

In Scotland, policy and parliamentary officers at Age Concern Scotland were also aware of the consultation, and they mentioned it to possible participating groups. The base of the research in London, however, meant that we could not develop such a close relationship with potential allies and their promotion of the project was therefore muted. Press releases to trade press, local papers and radio stations, and the health and care departments of national papers did not generate a large amount of publicity.

The web site

The web site at www.seniorspeak.org was the physical manifestation of the consultation. It consisted of the open access part of the web site, a straightforward web page, designed to have clear, readable text, rapid download times and clear navigation.
There were five separate pages within this part. The first three pages were informational: a home page as illustrated; a ‘who’ page; and a long page of information and links. The ‘who’ page showed photos of the lead politicians and messages from them, as illustrated:

Then there were two pages requiring input from the user, a ‘register’ page for registering, and the ‘enter the discussion’ page to take registered participants into the password-protected discussion area.

On the home page there was a message from broadcaster, campaigner and public personality Claire Rayner, who is active in older people’s campaigns, as well as welcome messages from the lead politicians. The logos of the partner national charities were visible on the site, as were links to the Hansard Society’s web site. This was to promote Seniorspeak as reliable, with familiar symbols and names on, and open and straightforward in explaining who was running the project and why.

The home page had the moderator’s full name and an e-mail address and freephone telephone number for any queries, while the ‘info’ page offered some background on older people, health policy and the legislative process, and links to other web sites. All of this was an attempt to provide a reliable yet welcoming web site that would encourage people to take part in the consultation.

Once a registered participant had entered the discussion area of the web site, there was another welcome message from the moderator, inviting the participant to read existing messages and post their own thoughts.

**Tone of messages**

The only instructions on what messages to leave were written on the opening page seen on entering the discussion area, and they were that ‘Each message should not exceed 1,000 words. It can be as short as you like. For legal reasons, we will remove any potentially libellous or defamatory postings.’ Apart from this, participants decided on what to say and how to say it in response to the implications of expected tone and form that they gathered from the site itself; from other participants; and from their own inclinations.
The first part of this chapter described the specificities of how we ran the Seniorspeak consultation, with pictures. This second part of the chapter explains what we learnt, particularly in response to the first of the two major questions of the research: What is different about engagement when it is over a distance, enabled by technology, from when it is carried out in the physical presence?

Registered participants

One hundred and seventy people registered for Seniorspeak over the six weeks it ran. Of these, 95 were women, 68 men, and seven did not indicate their gender.

One hundred and sixteen participants did not post any message, while 54 (not including the moderator) did post a message. 37 individuals posted only one message, while for multiple postings the frequency is shown in the chart above right.

Messages posted

Within the Seniorspeak discussion, 127 messages were posted, of which 13 were from the moderator and 114 from participants. Of these 114 messages, 30 were from men, 80 from women and four from a mixed group.

Of these 114 messages posted by participants, 37 contained an explicit response to a previous message, such as, 'I agree with...,' ‘re: your message,’ ‘thank goodness someone is speaking up on this topic.’ 24 messages referred to information gathered from media sources including web sites, television and radio programmes, print media, and press releases from government sources.

70 out of the 114 messages made explicit reference to government policy, mentioning central government, local government and even European policy.

Within these 114 messages, the divide between people mentioning a personal experience or event that they had directly
witnessed, and people raising an idea, concept or abstract point of argument was almost even, with 55 experiential messages as against 59 abstract messages. When posting a message, the participant had to decide which of five categories the message should be stored under, and the distribution of their 114 messages between categories was as shown in the chart below:

![Distribution of Seniorspeak Messages by Category](chart)

The content of the discussion as far as it addressed the topic of long-term care is described in a separate ‘findings report’. What is considered here is what the discussion reveals about the process of consultation.

We learnt from making observations of participants’ actions as they used the site, and we benefited from their own explanations of what they were doing, particularly through comments made in their exit surveys

**Exit surveys**

Thirty-seven participants returned an exit survey at the end of the six weeks of the consultation. This number is too small to offer statistically useful data on participation, and the people who took the trouble to return an exit survey cannot be assumed to be representative of the total 170 registered users. However, their responses to certain questions offered us further information, in the respondents’ own words, on our areas of interest. All answered positively to the question, ‘Do you think online consultations like this are a good idea?’, but the assent was qualified in two main ways.

Some were simply sceptical as to whether MPs would take any notice or whether it was only to ‘placate the public by telling them they have been consulted,’ while others raised more subtle points about the implications for parliamentary democracy. ‘Government’s job is to get the best advice possible on solutions to the country’s ills and then formulate intelligent policy to deal with them. Not ask the people what they want.’ This respondent went on to suggest that government by focus group is ‘crazy’, and that the role of an elected MP is to make difficult decisions. Another respondent echoed this concern that any form of consultation risks ‘being used as an alternative to politicians carrying out well-thought-out policies.’ They went on to say that politicians seem more concerned with image and popularity than ‘with acting on well-defined principles – which is the only thing that makes sense of party politics.’

On the whole they agreed with the sentiment that ‘anything that keeps politicians in touch with the diversity and confusion of real opinions of populations has to combat simplistic answers. And anything that gets more people involved in thinking about politics must combat apathy and get people voting again.’

Respondents stressed that online consultation should not replace other forms - such as through organisations - and they were even-handed in pointing out the pros and cons, as in the comment that ‘It’s one way and a good way but we also need face to face to remind ourselves that there is life outside your computer.’ Unequal access and difficulty of use were the major drawbacks, while the advantages were that location becomes unimportant, more people can be reached than by some offline methods, and that the ‘relative anonymity’ reduces shyness and encourages uninhibited discussion.

We asked whether using the computer was a good way for older people, in particular, to take part in a discussion, and again while nobody said that it was not, there was a range of comments that took issue with the premise of the question. Respondents mentioned problems of access and the need for older people to have ‘proper help and encouragement’ to use computers. Three respondents suggested that the situation under examination will change as new cohorts progress into the age category of ‘older people’, and as a result the
group who need the most encouragement are not the ‘young old’ but those aged over 80. Three respondents suggested that immobility or disability would be more useful characteristics to investigate than simply age, with one pithily observing that computer use offers benefits to older people ‘much like it does for anyone else of another age group.’

Finally, we asked whether participants like the idea that you can join in a discussion with people from all over the country. Again, the point was made that respondents liked the idea but were concerned about whether it would be widely enough used, be listened to and bring results. One respondent praised the consultation saying ‘I like to compare my problems with those being experienced by others,’ and this was expanded upon by another view that ‘the discussion and exchange of views aspect is perhaps even more useful than the communication with politicians.’ In criticism of the deliberative aspects, one said that there was ‘hardly any interaction’ while one spoke of their impression that ‘individual respondents had a bad experience of the care system, and wanted to say so, or the minority had a good experience and were happy to say so. What did not come out of it was a debate on “how you construct a system that people will all buy into” – if such a thing is possible!’

**Baby Boomer Bistro comparison**

In September 2002, after the Seniorspeak consultation had finished, the moderator was invited to be the guest in a live chat on the Baby Boomer Bistro. The BBB is a service on the web site of Age Concern England, offering discussion forums to any older people who register. The main point of this live chat was to see whether any notable differences arose between the Seniorspeak format of message posting, and the live chat format. The chat was trailed on the BBB site, as Seniorspeak had been. The topic of conversation was slightly different, in that there was more emphasis in the live chat publicity on the fact that the chat would be about ‘having your say’ and political participation, rather than basing all the discussion on the particular topic of long-term care. The guest speaker was introduced as the co-ordinator of the Seniorspeak consultation on long-term care, and this was discussed, but there was a somewhat broader range in the topic of the chat.

The most obvious differences from Seniorspeak were that the live chat took place over a much shorter amount of time (one hour as opposed to six weeks), and involved fewer people (no more than 15 people were online during the chat). The social bonds between chat participants were strong, with many of them being regular correspondents with each other. There were three employees of Age Concern taking part over the course of the chat, and they were well-practised at drawing in people to speak, encouraging a friendly and constructive atmosphere, and in all ways moderating skilfully.

**Conclusions**

One exit survey comment suggested that the consultation failed to develop a debate that worked towards a consensus of how to solve a difficult political question. Was this a failure of the format itself, or of the inventive skills of the participants? We suggest that it was not a failure, but a misunderstanding of the abilities of an online consultation. Several exit surveys gave reminders of the need for politicians to make considered, principled decisions rather than be excessively swayed by public opinion, and this is the ethos in which the consultation was designed: to provide experiences to help inform the politicians, not to provide them with answers. It remains with them to make the decisions.
CHAPTER FOUR
Observing older users

The second part of this report consists of case studies from visits paid to older people by the report's author, Melissa McCarthy.

The previous chapter describes the conclusions from running the Seniorspeak online consultation, which was done remotely, using the web site, e-mail and phone calls.

The second strand of this research was to pay visits to five different groups of older people, observing at first hand how they learnt to use computers. The visits took place in July and August 2002, and were arranged by my contacting the co-ordinators of each group and explaining that I hoped to add this form of research to my previous work on the Seniorspeak project. The co-ordinators allowed me to visit their older people and smoothed the way for me, introducing me favourably to the learners.

On each visit, I explained whom I was working for and what were the three strands of our research. I said that I was running the Seniorspeak consultation which asked for older people's views on long-term care, but that this also was a means of learning from them what they thought of computers, and what they thought about this as a means of having a say on political issues.

There was a level of awareness among all those visited of the Seniorspeak project, in that they had all heard their trainers mention it, although some had taken part and some had not. The five visits revealed an interesting progression in computer skills.

I describe the visits here, highlighting points of interest and concentrating on what they said about computers, at the expense of relating much about the content of their comments on health and on politics.
Visit 1 – reluctance

The first visit was to Fishersgate Community Centre, a successfully-expanding centre in a deprived neighbourhood. In the main room of the centre there are six networked computers which are used for formal training and are available to anyone who drops in during the day. This room is also used for the weekly lunch club, an hour-long session costing £3. Twenty-five people in their 70s and 80s, mostly quite frail, have lunch together and socialise.

The co-ordinator had seen Seniorspeak mentioned on a web site and registered for it. During lunch, she mentioned the consultation to some of the lunch club members, and three who were interested had gone with her after lunch to a computer terminal. She had typed in the message that they dictated to her. The members had not wanted to become any more deeply involved in the project, but they asked for the co-ordinator’s help to return to the web site each week to see how many times their messages had been read.

I visited the club for lunch and talked both to those who had posted messages and those who had not. The co-ordinator introduced me to members as ‘the lady doing the computer project,’ which in the most negative case provoked a reaction of a woman moving away with a look of disgust as she said, ‘Oh no, I don’t have the right brains for that.’ One man responded to the mention of computers by joking, ‘Yes, dotcom, we don’t know anything about that,’ showing that some terminology was familiar.

I spoke to Mrs R, one of the most mobile and active of the members, in her early 70s. She had left a message on Seniorspeak, and I was introduced to her as ‘the lady all the messages go to.’ She was surprised to meet me and said, ‘I didn’t realise you’d be so close. So the messages go to you.’ I said that they did, and I sent them on to the MPs. She commented that you can write to your MP with a problem, ‘But they always brush you off in the end, so you’ve wasted your breath.’

We looked together at Seniorspeak to see her message, and as I typed in the web site address she said, ‘That’s the phrase, www.seniorspeak.org,’ showing that she recognised the language. Mrs R could not use the computer herself, explaining that she would like to learn but she is anxious about how many things can go wrong, even for people who know how to use computers. She was happy to contribute to Seniorspeak when helped, but showed no interest in reading other messages or commenting further on the idea of the consultation.

I spoke to other members of the lunch club who had not visited the Seniorspeak web site. One woman said that she had attended a computer class, but that the trainer went too fast. She made the comparison that, ‘Like TV, it all rushes past you.’ When I asked another woman what she thought of computers, she said that she did not want to use one, but she wished the authorities would make better use of them. She complained about inefficient storage and sharing of information, and in particular that to receive health and care services it is necessary to provide the same personal data many times.

Main points from this visit

- The attitude of some of the lunch club members showed that there is considerable fear and resistance towards computers, even when they are used in a friendly and trusted atmosphere.
- Services for older people work at a very local scale, from the point of view of the providers and of the users. The lunch club only worked because the community workers were active on a scale small enough for them to be able to drop leaflets through every door in their catchment area and make themselves known to potential members. Members were able to attend the popular lunch club because it was close to their homes.
- Lunch club members showed that it is possible to use equipment and to participate in a project without having a sophisticated understanding of how the equipment or project works, and that one can use terms without understanding what they mean.

Visit 2 – elements that are left out

The second visit was to the SERVE centre in Rushden, Northamptonshire, a voluntary organisation which provides older and disabled people in the area with a range of care and services, including, most recently, a computer suite and training. The SERVE management brought together a group of five people whom they thought might be interested in the Seniorspeak project. This group consisted of a SERVE co-ordinator, a
The co-ordinator had shown the Seniorspeak flyer to all members of the group and discussed the project before my visit, but none of the others had seen the web site. We gathered around a table in the computer suite, but we spent an hour in discussion before turning to a computer.

**Status and credibility** The first thing that the group wanted to establish clearly was what this project was for and whether the Hansard Society was in a position to run a project that could have a proper impact. There was a strong sense of scepticism (not hostility) about a project that involved making contact with politicians, because of the feeling that MPs don’t make any decisions about things that actually matter; all the power lies with spin doctors and civil servants who have no public service motive. Some examples of the impact of previous work served to allay slightly their fears about the capabilities of the project, and they thought that my having phone conversations with the lead MP indicated a close enough relationship to give some credibility to the project. They accepted without any suspicion the fact that it was non-partisan and impartial, and when I reminded them that the MPs with most involvement are those in the All-Party Group, which means they aren’t exclusively government but want to work together, there were murmurs of approval.

**Validity of views** Eighty-three year-old Mrs I, the frailest member of the group, explained that for many years she had looked after a disabled son, who now lives in a nearby home, and that her experiences with him had spurred her into setting up what grew into a national charity for families with disabled children. She herself needs help with transport and attends the day centre once a week. She said she had also looked after her husband when he was ill, and had had a lot of contact with medical services. But she mentioned all this as a way of explaining that probably no-one would be interested in what she had to say; her point was that because so much of her time had been spent on the experience of looking after people, her views were not sought after. I assured her that views based on experience were what we wanted, and she looked pleased but a little doubtful.

**Locality** The group showed a strong sense of civic duty and community pride, all expressing their desire to be able to ‘give something back’ by an involvement in social life. SERVE is a project strongly rooted in the particular town, and some of the group had lived in the area all their lives. The idea of locality was apparent in the way their conversation frequently veered towards housing developments and the way that the built environment was rapidly changing. They also displayed a strong sense of how social mores had changed over their lifetimes, within the fixed area where they lived, giving attitudes towards illness and disability as an example. Mrs I asked whether there were groups like them all over the country, and I said, yes, we were trying to gather views from all over. She laughed and wondered why they would want to talk about health care to people who lived somewhere else, because they weren’t in the same situation as people who lived in Rushden. I said that was part of the point, to see whether people would want to compare the differences in situation between where they lived. She said that we’d all end up with Geordie accents if we talked too much to another group.

**Computer** After discussing health for an hour, the conversation came to an issue that was the subject of a previous Seniorspeak message. I read this message to them from a print-out and they wanted to respond to it. I suggested that we look at how the computer stored discussion, so they could post their own message. Mrs J shook her head with a look of humorous distaste, and said that she thought computers were a waste of time.

Mr A, the volunteer computer trainer, had been edged out of work because of his age, but he had managed to stay there for a final year when they were installing a new computer system, so he was able to learn about that before leaving. Mrs I didn’t use a computer, but her disabled son had been taught about them in his home, and she said that if her son could do this, there was nothing to stop her. She intended to return the next week during her visits to the day centre, to have a closer look at the project. Mrs M had not used computers before, but she looked on keenly, and gave instructions to the computer volunteer who was acting as scribe. She told him to move down the page to look at the lower messages on a list, and she checked that he was typing in the group’s message in the right wording.

I explained that I had made this site, in my office, and it had an explanation of the project and messages from the MPs, which they liked. I explained that this was a way of storing all the messages together in a way that people anywhere could read them. I checked that they followed this basic outline of the site, and then I showed...
them how to read the message that we’d discussed. We all looked through the index to try to find it. They knew the content of the message, so they offered suggestions as to which one it might be in the index listing. I explained that it looked laborious to find the message on the screen when I had it on paper in my hand, but that equipment can seem slow when you are new to it. They all nodded at this. When we found the message that they wanted to respond to, Mr A typed in the message while the others put forward improvements.

Two of the group asked for a copy of the messages printed out, because they were very interested to see what was being discussed, but had no computer expertise and preferred to read through it in the familiar manner. They liked the idea that you could see next to each message on the screen how many times it had been read. This is part of a feeling set out by many participants that it is nice for people to be interested in you and what you have to say, because it can be lonely and isolating to be old.

**Reductiveness** Over the two hours I was with them, the group gave a very detailed and rich picture of how medical care, as a component of society, had changed over the course of their lives, and of what their personal experiences had led them to think about care and related issues. We talked about personal experience and cultural change, about politics and ethics. One person had brought along a magazine cutting that drew attention to a point that raised her anger. The group swapped views, deferred to each other’s experience, learnt from one another, and generally provided a lively discussion that brought in the collected experience of a great many years. But while the two comments that they posted on the web site that day made valid points that would be of interest to other Seniorspeak participants, they could not reveal the richness of the conversation that generated these comments. They posted one message about an excess of red tape preventing competent people from effectively giving care. But this message did not and could not show the debating, the swapping of stories, the physical demonstration with which one person acted out the difficult task of getting into bed when one has mobility problems. The end message certainly synthesised their deliberations and conveyed their agreed view on a problem with the current system. But it lost a lot of context and richness.

**Main points from this visit**

- They were interested and broad-minded, willing to contribute to a new project and share their experience, debating constructively within the group. During the visit, they drew connections and parallels between different policy areas and issues, on national and local scales.
- Despite their experience of familiarity with many aspects of social engagement including work, volunteering and political activity, they were instantly suspicious of a project involving MPs.
- They displayed a strong sense of the local, and together they commanded a big sweep of knowledge because they had been *there* a long time.
- There was a richness of debate apparent in their face-to-face discussion that could not be conveyed online.
Visit 3 – keeness to follow the instructions

The third visit was to the Open Age Project in Ladbroke Grove, London, a voluntary organisation promoting ‘active leisure’ through social meetings, activities and learning, with a strong emphasis on members devising and becoming involved in the activities. During discussion with a volunteer about my project and the centre’s work, she expressed the view which underpins Open Age’s work, that ‘active leisure is the best preventative medicine that there is.’

In 2000 Open Age fitted out a computer room next door to the Project’s main office and drop-in centre, and recruited a trainer, on a sandwich year placement from a computer studies degree course. Firstly the Open Age staff, many of them volunteers from among the membership, were offered training, as their office systems were at this time switched to a new computer format. Then IT classes were offered to all the members, along with open access to the computer suite. I visited not these introductory classes but a follow-up refresher course, which the trainer had initiated on thinking that her learners would benefit from practising the skills they had been introduced to, and would gain further computer confidence. She had contacted all previous learners from the introductory class, and these were ones who had wanted to brush up on particular skills. Classes cost £2 for two hours, and to drop in costs 50p an hour, although this opportunity is not widely used.

The class I visited was not at the stage of familiarity where they could have used the Seniorspeak web site by themselves, and they were there for a particular learning purpose, so it was not possible to observe them in a Seniorspeak context. This visit was just to learn about how they took to computers and particularly how they learn about the computer as an information-providing tool.

Uptake and confidence A representative from WCIT (the Worshipful Company of Information Technologists), the City livery guild who had planned the installation of the computer suite, helped out at every class. He suggested that no project will thrive unless it has the involvement and ‘ownership’ of the people who use it and those who are necessary for it to function. The main trainer agreed with him that the role of the non-IT staff at the project was crucial, as this was the real indicator of whether IT would be taken on as an accepted method used throughout Open Age, or whether it would remain a suspect outside interest. The idea is of ‘embedding’ IT use as part of common practice, so that it is used as just another tool, rather than IT remaining a separate object of interest, to be learnt about but not internalised.

I spoke to a volunteer member of staff, aged over 60, who had attended classes when they transferred to a PC computer system. She used the new system for admin work, but said that she would not use the office computer to provide any of their extensive literature and advice to anyone who came in asking for help. She said that if someone wanted to access information via the computers, she would direct them to the IT trainer, who could help them with the technology. The trainer agreed that if someone came along wanting information, it would be easier and quicker for them to ask the staff, rather than looking for it themselves on the internet. They both saw the computers as an obstacle for users to master, rather than, at this stage, as a tool to achieve further ends.
Open Age are in the midst of installing a further suite of computers in the main office and drop-in area of the centre, which all staff saw as being a big step towards making IT use more integrated into their other activities. The computers have been and will continue to be in a room a mere 10 feet away, but there was a sense that this room was separate. It is locked when the trainer is not in there, and the tea break takes place in the main office.

**Learners and attitudes** Learners had come to the IT course when it was advertised as another activity and learning opportunity, and the course quickly became oversubscribed. Their initial attitudes ranged from, ‘I don’t want to learn but I feel I should,’ to, ‘I’m interested in learning about computers,’ to, ‘This is a way for me keep in touch with grandchildren.’ The trainer noted that when they began, many of the learners were afraid that they would break the computers.

Some took the first course and then stopped, saying they had learnt something new but did not want to make further use of it. Some learners came to obtain a particular skill which would help them pursue an existing interest, such as learning word processing so that they could use the centre’s computers to work on their writing. One learner had just bought his own computer, so that he could do at home all the things he was learning, but he specified that he had needed plenty of help from friends to install it and work out the basics of that machine. He wanted to keep attending classes, and asked the trainer for advice on using his own equipment and on what else to get. He was aware that getting the equipment was only the beginning of his work.

During the class there was a friendly atmosphere, with learners commenting aloud on what they were doing with what results. They didn’t turn to each other for advice, but waited for the trainer or volunteer to come to them and fix a problem. They had built up a shared joke out of recurring problems, so that when one said to the trainer, ‘Can you help, my whole screen’s disappeared?’ the others all laughed together exclaiming that they had all had that problem before. Some learners still needed reminding on how to click on the mouse with the right degree of force, indicating that the basic skills need frequent reinforcing for a long time after they are first learnt.

The learners had gained the ability to use a computer when everything was working as expected, but they were not advanced enough to know how to solve problems that arose such as the roller-ball of a mouse coming loose, and they needed both the trainer’s technical support and her encouragement. If a problem arose when there was no trainer to help fix it, this provided a blow to the user’s confidence that, the trainer claimed, sometimes put them off ever using a computer again.

It was clear when the trainer gave an instruction that they had all learnt collectively. Sometimes she reminded the learners explicitly that they had learnt this before, saying, ‘Everyone remembers where we learnt that you type in the address of a web site: in the address bar.’ Sometimes it was clear from the uniformity of their action that they were recalling a specific instruction from previous classes.

**Following a set pattern** All terminals were set up with the standard settings familiar to the learners, who were more comfortable with following a set pattern than with using alternative means to get to a stage. To open the programme Internet Explorer, for example, they knew that they must click on the icon, but when one learner was moving towards the icon on the desktop, the volunteer pointed them to the icon on the toolbar. There was no recognition from the learner that these two icons led to the same place. Rather, the learner trusted the direction of the trainer and wasn’t familiar with the idea that there were two ways to achieve one result.

**Searching for information** The class were learning how to use the Google search engine for simple and advanced searching. The previous week, they had learnt how to go to and use a web site for which you know the address. This week, first they followed the trainer’s instructions for how to locate information that you strongly suspect will be available, but for which you don’t know the address. They tracked down the web site for a national chain of cinemas, then went into the site to find films, times, and their nearest cinema. The class stopped when it reached the stage of ordering tickets online, and the trainer told me that all of her learners were extremely suspicious of the idea of giving out credit card details over the internet, because it ran contrary to all the security measures they are used to. After going through the search process once, the trainer led the class in recapping what they had learnt, and they talked through the steps of the process.

One asked briefly how the search engine came up with the results it offered them, but no-one was concerned about the reliability of what was offered. They were mainly looking at mainstream corporate sites from names that they recognised, and only the defunct link to a personal site didn’t work. This prompted the trainer to remind the learner that you should look at any dates on the information offered, because people can neglect to maintain sites. There was no discussion about the correctness, bias or reliability of the information, only about whether it was available or not.
The trainer emphasised that it wasn’t important to think like the computer which was bringing up the information, but rather like the person who had made the web page for which one was looking and who had put the desired information there. In keeping with this, there were groans of resignation when an unpopular train company failed to provide the information they wanted. The learners had been told to come to the class with a subject they wanted to learn more about, and the second stage of the class was to find further information on their personal interests. They didn’t discuss the difference between locating information that you suspect to be there, and trawling for information that you hope to find.

Integrate Learners were entertained and impressed by the ease with which they could find what they wanted, eg. details of work by a favourite painter, details of Broadway shows for next week, certain train timetables. The range of the topics that the learners had chosen to search on was interesting, because it was an example of how IT needs to integrate with the rest of their lives if it is to be accepted and used. For the learner searching for painters, for example, this was his main interest, and he had a sketchbook of his own work in his bag.

Location came into most of the searches. Four learners out of the five present looked up travel times and costs for journeys they were planning, and three found that their searches brought up information about a location. The learner looking up show times was a frequent traveller, visiting friends all round the world, and had been throughout his life. He said that learning about computers hadn’t really altered his enthusiasm for travelling in any way. He knew how to use e-mail but said that he had never been a great one for correspondence and didn’t feel any need to use this technology to keep in touch with people. The trainer agreed that the widespread view among her learners was that some liked to be able to e-mail family abroad, but it hadn’t greatly altered any of their behaviour or attitudes towards distance and travel.

Age At no point during the computer class did any of the learners or the trainer mention age. That wasn’t a consideration; they were simply learners trying to get to grips with a new tool. During the tea break, however, they did talk mainly about non-IT topics, and here age was an issue, when they discussed shared acquaintances and social happenings. They were all involved in their searches, reluctant to finish the class, and keenly looking forward to next week’s class. One said as he indicated towards his computer, ‘Once you start on these things it gets addictive.’

Main points from this visit

- Equipment and access make no impact unless there is trusted personal support, and the considerable time needed to gain familiarity with the equipment.
- Using the computers happens long before understanding them; the learners were able to pursue a wide range of interests while still at a limited stage of computer knowledge. They were far from the stage of being able to fix any problem without the trainer’s support, and they showed little interest in the concepts of what they were doing, being more interested in the results.
- IT projects need to fit in with the existing structure and functioning of the group. With the older people working as staff in the organisation, it is important for them to feel that computers are an integral tool for their work, so that they can project this attitude throughout the membership. For other learners, continued use of IT after an introduction depends on its ability to further a learner’s existing interest.

Visit 4 – personalised learning

The fourth visit was to the Braunston computer bus, where I asked older learners what they thought about computers. As in the previous visit, the learners were not advanced enough to participate in the Seniorspeak consultation. The explorer buses are a project of one section of Age Concern, with four buses in use in the Midlands. I visited one in Braunston, Leicester, an inner-city area in receipt of much regeneration funding.

The bus visits two locations each day, for a training session of two and a half hours, led by one trainer assisted by the driver. At night, the bus is securely stored in a local bus garage. The staff have to get permission to park their bus off-street during the day, in places convenient and close for their target users. Sometimes two separate locations are only a few streets apart, but moving that small distance closer makes all the difference for people with mobility problems. Libraries, community centres, sports halls and a bingo hall have agreed that the bus can park on their premises at certain times. The bus has a generator for all its own power and does not need to be linked up to the fixed premises in any way. As well as providing a place to park, each organisation is chosen because the bus hopes to attract its clientele. The bus staff ask the organisation what would be a good day to be there, when there will be older people already using the location, or nearby.
So, for example, a slot is planned parking the bus next to a temple, where a group of older men who already attend a swimming class together thought they would like to start learning about computers, as a group. This aspect of the bus coming close to a group is an important part of the strategy. Their target clientele are people who have no experience of computers and who would not take great steps to start learning. They would not, on their own, go to a library and get to grips with equipment there, or attend public computer classes open to people of all ages, as they describe below. The buses come to the learners, on a very local scale, to places that they already might be familiar with. Classes are free but must be booked.

For the older learners in these case studies, the local and the small-scale are strong motivating factors. Learners do not want to go far, or to be in large groups where they might struggle unseen. They also have no desire to pursue qualifications; rather, the point is to overcome initial fear and to alert the learner to some of the possibilities of computer use. After the classes they might feel confident to attend a public class, or follow up this new interest in any way, whereas before they were too new to it, not even ready to begin to learn. One man said that he saw it was that if he goes to five classes, over 10 hours, and only one 20-second instruction really sinks in to his mind, then the classes will have been worth it, because that’s how you build up your knowledge, in small, sporadic increments.

I watched a class of four learning about word-processing, then I asked individual learners how they had been introduced to computers.

Mr B said that learning at the bus was much better than going to a library or similar class, because they have a habit of rushing through too fast. The bus is heavily branded as an Age Concern project, 'We know it’s theirs, and we trust people like them, they’re our friends. We can come here and they don’t mind that we’re a bit slower.' Other learners complained that even family members or friends can prove useless at introducing a learner to computers, because they are not used to explaining to someone who goes slowly or doesn’t already understand computers.

Mr B had first learnt about computers from staff training at the community association for which he is on the committee. As a general comment, he described a computer suite in a local library, and spoke approvingly about how it is designed to draw in learners gently. 'Next to the books section of the library, there’s a smart new wing, behind a glass screen which can be drawn back to open the two sections to each other. The staff mention that this is the new computer suite, and you can wander through to have a look. All the chairs and desk heights and screens are fully adjustable, so you can make it as comfortable as you like, if you sit down. Then a staff member might come through with you and say, “You know how to play solitaire, don’t you?” and sit you down to play a game of that. Then they’ve brought you in before you know it. That’s the idea, to overcome resistance.'

I asked him what he found the benefit of using computers was: whether he could do things differently, or whether brand new options became available to him. He said that the computer lets you do things more quickly, and neatly. He uses it for letters and spreadsheets. He uses the internet only to watch the ships in the Panama Canal over a web cam. 'I like the idea that they’re on the other side of the world but you can spy on them, and sometimes when I see a person who isn’t working hard, I feel I could shout out, “Oi you lazy fellow, get working.” The more computer kit there is around you, the more you get exposed to it and so there’s more chance that you’ll eventually have a go.'

He and his wife both learnt locally, because the community association received New Deal for Communities funding (central government funding aimed at helping specific areas, in a tightly-defined spatial boundary, to involve local groups in regenerating the neighbourhood). Again, the local, spatially-defined, was instrumental in making this group computer-literate. Mr B works on accounts for the association, and wants to learn more electronic photography skills, so that he can put more pictures into the community newsletter.

Mrs B also learnt 18 months ago, when the community association trained its staff. Before then, she was set against computers. She and her husband once went to a taster session together, but she wouldn’t touch the computers. When the staff training came up, however, she had to agree to learn. She said that she and her husband stick to the aspects of the computer that they like best. So he does the accounts and she uses e-mail and looks thing up. I asked if she always knows the exact information source she’s looking for before she starts, or whether she sometimes starts looking without knowing where she will find the knowledge she is after. She said that she just plunges in, mainly using the ‘Ask Jeeves’ search engine that the bus teacher introduced them to. Her example was that if a granddaughter had asthma, she would do a search for medical and practical information.
I asked if their friends were following their example and approaching computers, and she said that mainly they are reluctant, using the pretext that they are too busy. But, both agreed, most of their friends had no particular reason to learn. Mr B said people think they’re going to break the computer, even though you assure them that they can’t. People think that they are clumsy, and the computer valuable. ‘But it saves you getting a typewriter, which you can break or jam the keys. If you make a mistake typing, that’s a sheet of paper wasted, but on the computer there’s nothing to break and you can make sure you’ve done it right.’

Several learners on the buses had been prompted to learn about computers by seeing a younger family member and wanting to be able to use the same skills. One woman had played computer games with her granddaughter but wanted to know what else she could do on this equipment. One woman had played computer games with her granddaughter but wanted to know what else she could do on this equipment. As the session finished, one woman asked if she could bring a friend along with her to the next session. There was some discussion with the trainers as to whether the friend had any experience of computers; they said that if the friend had no exposure at all and was struggling with the most basic skills while the others learnt how to use the internet, it would unfairly slow them down. The woman then suggested that her friend just sit in the bus and watch, and everyone agreed that this was a very good idea. The friend would be introduced to computers, able to see older people in action using them, without having to embark on any learning yet herself.

**Main points from this visit**

- Stealth familiarisation is vital to encourage people to make the first steps which they need before they can build up a useful way of using computers.
- People will use a computer if it offers them a better way of doing something that they want to do, or enables them to do something new.
- A bus is a very good method for introducing older people because it has novelty yet is close, convenient, and branded with a familiar and trusted name. It fulfils the other main criterion arising from this visit: that learning works best in a local environment. It feels safer, is easier to reach, and these great leaps that the internet offers, transcending distance and bringing places together, can only happen when build on the most solid of local foundations.

**Visit 5 – conceptual mastery over the equipment**

Visit five was to a Hairnet training session in Luton. Hairnet is a small company running a programme of computer training for the over-50s. Rather than giving classes themselves, Hairnet’s model is to train and accredit other trainers and provide them with material that the trainers use to give private, individual lessons to older learners.

I went to observe the trainer giving a lesson to Mrs G, who is progressing quickly in her classes. She is a sophisticated learner who reads about and follows developments in computer equipment, and her first words during the class were, ‘Why do they bundle so many ISPs?’ She is at the interesting stage of making the change from knowing how to follow certain procedures using a computer, to having a conceptual understanding of what she is doing. This is a vital step in letting a user take control of the equipment; once you understand the concepts rather than the steps in an instruction, it is easier to adapt this knowledge to unfamiliar circumstances.

The class I observed was to revisit using the Word programme, at the learner’s request. The teaching process was thorough and rather descriptive, with the trainer talking the learner through many toolbar options and describing what options were available there. They did not use or practise most of the options, just outlined what each button or command did. They had covered some of this material before, so it was not the first time these options had been described to the learner. Also, she agreed that it all sounded familiar, saying, ‘Oh yes, I’ve read about tables in the computer book I’m reading.’

The learner was full of praise for a ‘How to…’ computer book, saying that the screenshots of how her computer should look at each stage was especially useful. The trainer commented that those publishers were well-known for the quality of their children’s books, and the learner joked, ‘Well, I am a child when it comes to computers.’ Mrs G learnt through a combination of online and offline methods, taking notes with a pen and paper of important details of what she was learning, and referring often to her book.

The trainer frequently recapplied what they had just covered, advising the learner to make a note of a process such as clicking on the ‘open’ icon, choosing a file name, then clicking the ‘open’ button. While outlining the purpose of
the options, the lesson applied some of these options to the specific task of writing of a letter. Mrs G says that she never
writes letters, and hasn’t done for three years or so, because they always phone people instead. But she doesn’t mind
learning particular skills through the practice of writing one. She was keen and not over-awed by the computer. When
the auto-correct function was demonstrated, she said, ‘How clever.’ She explained, ‘When you’re new to the
computer you don’t look at the whole thing, you focus on the little bit you’re doing.’

Whenever during the lesson either of them noticed a point or a problem of particular interest they commented
on it and perhaps deviated into discussion of it, but there were so many points that could have prompted
further discussion that this seemed slightly arbitrary, which points would prompt comment.

They practised saving a sample letter, then altering and formatting it. The trainer was not afraid of confusing
Mrs G by using the conceptual description, ‘I always have the inflated idea that text on the clipboard is hidden
in the mouse, though it’s not.’ Mrs G had no difficulty in following detailed instructions about formatting her
text. She had a good idea of how aspects relate: when told something, she might remember that she had been
told that before, or that she had used that option before, or just that it is a similar procedure to one she had
used before. This is the important point from this visit, that she was able to relate concepts. When a dialogue
box appeared on screen she asked, ‘What do you call those boxes? I’ve seen those in other programmes.’ And
she understood that this was a tool that did a similar type of process in different situations on the computer,
explaining, ‘What I like is learning about things like the dialogue boxes, because they make it all make sense.’
She also showed this desire to understand the workings, not just the instructions for use, of the computer, by
her appreciation of having the trainer there, because, ‘The book tells you what to do but not what things mean.’

Mrs G said, ‘I print out e-mails because when you’re over 50 the memory goes.’ She has used her computer to
scan in pictures to send to a son in Australia, and she is keen to adopt new technology such as web cams, as
soon as it becomes available. Her favourite web site is an over-50s site that puts up puzzles that you can
download and solve. After practising on the letter, Mrs G decided to put her skills to use in making a poster,
altering font size, colour, typeface and position on the page. She joked with the trainer about which typeface
would be most ‘with-it’ for use in a poster for her young granddaughters, bringing up an idea of trends,
newness, and youth, although they didn’t discuss this in any more detail.

Mrs G said that her husband is still very wary of the computer, and does not have the patience to learn how
to use it; if he cannot do the task he wants straight away, he says it’s useless and goes back to an offline
method. She related how recently he realised that he had not paid the gas bill on time, and came to her in a
flurry asking her if she could do anything. Mrs G had a look at the bill and found that it could be paid online,
which she promptly did. She said that her husband was grudgingly impressed, and that ‘If I keep on coming
up with things like that, eventually he’ll come round.’ Mrs G came to computers because her granddaughter
and son pressured her, and they argued round her husband into agreeing to get one. She said that she was adamant
that she only wanted the best equipment, and she uses it everyday, checking e-mail and using other
applications, because ‘otherwise it’s not worth having.’

Mrs G commented that you do need help and guidance to get to a stage where you can usefully use the
computer. She said the problem is that you want to do too much, too fast, and it’s so interesting that you try
to do things beyond your capability. She mentioned that for people of her generation (the over-65 age group),
learning is different from for today’s children. She was much more cautious, unwilling to draw attention to
herself or to things she didn’t understand, and would simply wait for the teacher to clear up a point or for
someone else to ask it, rather than asking anything herself. The trainer agreed, saying that in evening classes it
is much the same, with the younger people much quicker to raise points with the teacher, and to get the
attention that they need in order to progress. Mrs G remained an enthusiastic and quick student, closing with
the comment that ‘You need an open mind, then computers can offer you so much.’

Main points from this visit

- The learner asserted that her generation have different memories and experiences of learning than
  younger generations.
- The class showed how effective individual training can be. Mixed-media learning helps to back up the
  intensity of computer use.
- You need things that you want to do, before using the computer.
- A vital stage of computer understanding is reached when the learner understands the concept of
  what they are doing, rather than simply following a set of instructions.
CHAPTER FIVE
Conclusions

We have looked at what participants in the online consultation said about political engagement, and what they displayed by their actions. We have also examined how older people come to be familiar with computers. What can we conclude from combining these two lines of inquiry?

The main finding on using technology for engagement is that the remote communication that it enables has advantages and disadvantages over same-location engagement. As Seniorspeak participants insisted in their exit surveys, we need both. The advantage of using technology is that it is in certain ways easier, allowing a speed and range of communication that cannot be matched by other methods. The primary disadvantage is that the internet technology used during our research precludes certain aspects of engagement and communication, particularly those aspects of richness and depth that are sometimes essential for effective communication.

We found when trying to consider ‘older people’ as a research group that there is no such homogenous group. The range of participants and their responses that we encountered during all parts of the research strongly backed this up, and participants themselves suggested that mobility or disability would be better markers for targeting a research group. We did find social provision that does not manage to meet the needs of many people who fall within a very broad descriptive category, and we found corresponding services springing up to meet these needs. The people who use the Computer Explorer buses described the situation as one in which ‘we might need particular help in getting to the starting line’ of learning to become computer-literate, but the visit to the Open Age project strongly indicated that once people have taken the step to start doing computing and learning, age simply drops away as an issue.

Finally, to expand a comparison between computer-literacy and political engagement, we found that they are both skills and ways of understanding that can be learnt via a great range of practices and experiences. The range displayed by the older learners visited is matched by the great range of experiences and personal histories that prompted Seniorspeak participants to take part and to be politically engaged. This research has considered older people in conjunction with both computers and politics, and we conclude that, as one exit survey response put it, ‘just like everybody else,’ older people can come to a fine command of means of communication, but these skills then require others willing to join in the dialogue.

We asked four people whose work has given them particular insight into aspects of the triangular relationship between older people, computers and politics to contribute short pieces to this report.

With 11 million pensioners currently in Britain, and a further five million expected to join their ranks in the next few decades, older people make up a substantial proportion of the voting public. Studies have also shown that the over 60s are more likely to turn out at election time than any other section of society – and in some constituencies their votes can even determine which candidate gets into parliament.

However, whilst writing letters to MPs or visiting them at their local surgeries may be commonplace to many older people – using new technology and the internet remains beyond the reach of the vast majority.

The latest figures show that 89 per cent of pensioner households do not have access to a computer and therein lies one of the major stumbling blocks to e-campaigning amongst today’s older generation. Only when the issue of access is resolved will we be able to widen the electronic participation of older people in the political process.

Nevertheless, the National Pensioners Convention (NPC) – the group which represents pensioners and their organisations across the country – has run courses and education days aimed at both teaching older people basic internet skills and explaining how those skills can be used to run e-campaigns.

Most MPs now have e-mail addresses and this can be an important way of both lobbying them and keeping in touch with other like-minded campaigners – but new technology is unlikely to replace the sheer people power of a huge postbag of letters, a mass lobby of parliament or a protest outside a local MPs surgery.
Nevertheless, as the nature of the pensioner population changes, it is likely that we will see ever greater numbers of older people who are not only familiar with new technology but also have greater access to it. The real way forward must therefore be to combine both the old and new ways of political campaigning to get our message across.

Jack Jones, Honorary Life President of the National Pensioners Convention

There is now a significantly greater number of older people as a proportion of the population as a whole than at any time in our history. One of the greatest challenges that faces our society is to respond to the needs of the ageing population, and to give older people the opportunity to continue to make a full contribution to society. There is a risk though that as services continue to develop around new technologies, the older population will be excluded in society.

Older people actually have the most to gain from access to online services. They can provide new ways of getting and sharing information, enabling older people to make more informed decisions about issues which affect their health and well-being. New means of communication can provide a remedy to isolation, enabling contact with people who are not in the same physical environment, which is especially important these days as more families fragment to take up residence in different places. Skills and confidence gained in using online services can not only boost self-esteem, but can also have economic benefits by enabling older people to consider career changes or greater involvement in voluntary activity. Finally, access to online services can also provide new ways for older people to remain ‘visible’ and participate in local, regional and national decision-making.

Age Concern is developing a number of initiatives to widen and deepen the engagement of older people. These include initiatives to enable and encourage more older people to enjoy the benefits of ICTs, by developing IT skills and confidence, helping to raise awareness of the benefits and the relevance to older people and by developing electronic content which is accessible and engaging.

Emma Aldridge, Project Manager, IT and older people at Age Concern England

The All-Party Group for Ageing and Older People is broad-based both in the political representation within it and in the interests which it represents. Yes, we concern ourselves with issues specific to older people, such as pensions and ageism. But we concern ourselves also with any area of policy and service provision insofar as it affects older people. Clearly health service provision is of increasing importance to us as we experience the effects of senescence. But public transport provision - e.g. access, affordability and concessions – also becomes increasingly important to older people as they become less mobile, perhaps more isolated and restricted of income. The example of transport transfers to the world of IT. Buses and trains are means of physical communication for older people. Likewise, IT is playing an increasingly important role in the communication of their needs, their feelings and their views. Seniorspeak run by the Hansard Society in partnership with Age Concern showed how this can work. Contributors included not only older people, but also their families and carers across the whole spectrum of care. Thus the dialogue was across a wide range of experience. It was also across a wide generational range. This enhanced its interest value for all groups. To those not yet classed as old it provided authentic communication of the world as it is experienced and, importantly, perceived by older people. To the older people themselves it provided the opportunity of interaction with a wider range of age groups, professions and opinions than is always available to them. And it was on equal terms. The keyboard and the computer monitor filter out physical factors which can give rise to patronising behaviour and prejudice against older people. The potential is exciting - especially for the members of the APGAO.

Eddie O’Hara MP, Chair of the All-Party Group for Ageing and Older People
There are at least four excellent reasons for entering politics towards one’s sell-by date. First, one is likely to have time to spare. Secondly, one has a lifetime of experience to call upon, thirdly, as an idealist and optimist one might be able to help people. Fourthly, if one is extremely lucky to be in the right place at the right time, it could be a challenging and worthwhile way of supplementing one’s pension. I still object when I am described as an elderly retired doctor and swell with pleasure when referred to as one of the more mature Members of Parliament. I believe my views on matters relating to my previous experiences as a doctor are respected.

Sitting as an independent MP is a great privilege and allows one to watch the workings of the House of Commons with a critical and questioning attitude. Why do divisions still take place in the time-honoured but archaic way they do? Is it to allow informal and sometimes very useful discussion in the lobbies? As my voting is not ever preordained by a whip I can meet Members of all parties at different times. What makes even a government with a large majority change its mind occasionally? Is it the threat of a backbench revolt or is it a genuine realisation that there could be a better way of doing something?

Many senior citizens are computer literate and basic skills have made my new job possible. Instant communication and retrieval of data or the accessing of new information are essential. Even as an MP with superbly helpful staff I cannot expect them to do this for me all the time.

I believe that people prefer their elected representatives at all political levels to be members of their own communities and not the youthful, career-minded individuals from far afield sometimes parachuted in by major political parties. Opportunities in politics for the mature do exist and there is no better way of maintaining health than keeping body and brain as active as possible!

Dr Richard Taylor FRCP MP, independent Member for Wyre Forest
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vii ICM poll entitled *IT, the Internet and Older People*, July 2002, available online at http://www.icmresearch.co.uk/reviews/2002/it-internet-old-people.htm

viii Distribution of MPs into Age Bracket Chart - information supplied by Darren Darcy and Colin Mellors of the University of Bradford.

ix See http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk for NHS Direct Online
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