Confronting digital ageism: Towards a better aging future

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Kim Sawchuk, Professor of Communication Studies at Concordia University, explores tackling digital ageism to build a better future for aging

Our contemporary society is increasingly defined in the media by whatever emergent technology becomes aligned with the promise of a better future. Twenty years ago, it was the Internet. Ten years ago, the introduction of mobile phones was considered the hallmark of new ways of communicating and interacting in “networked societies” (Castells). In the past five years, the advent of AI (Artificial Intelligence) has entered our collective imagination.

However, the pace of technological development and investment is such that devices, software, and platforms quickly become obsolete or, even if they are useful, thought of as being passé. Facebook, once deemed cutting edge, has become labelled as an old-fashioned platform and is associated with a demographic of older users. To remain current, the company rebranded itself as Meta. The derision towards the very word “old” within the context of a society that values the “new” undergirds what researchers in aging and the study of technology in everyday life call digital ageism (Sawchuk et al.; Manor & Herscovic; Rosales et al.).

Defining ageism

In the 1960s, Robert Butler famously defined ageism as negative attitudes or behaviours directed toward people solely on the basis of age (Butler). Ageism judges people according to age-based stereotypes – or myths – that take a particular attribute or condition, such as physical frailty, and make these attributes the basis of an entire identity. Stereotypes are socially and culturally created myths that become naturalized as inevitable or preordained.

Myths about human aging, or stereotypes, are powerful and feed age-based prejudice (Gullette). In traditional children’s books, older adults have traditionally been depicted as unattractive, frail, incapable of learning, conservative, useless, dependent, forgetful- or inherently sweet and kind. Boomers, the latest term for a new generation of older adults, is a form of derision of an entire generation. Likewise, younger people, such as Millennials, often are characterized as individualistic, uncaring, vain, and inherently technologically adept- if not addicted to social media- in the news. The negative impact of these myths on the lives of older adults, in particular, has been documented extensively (North & Fiske; Köttle et al.), including the harmful impact of “self-ageism” (Lagacé et al.).

Images that link age stereotypes towards aptitude and attitudes toward technology abound in popular culture and in social media. They are often a source of humour. A popular YouTube video circulating in Germany in 2013 demonstrates an older adult talking about how useful he found his tablet computer, then using it as a cutting board. In a popular tech challenge, young children are asked to make a phone call on a rotary phone- and are baffled by what to do.

More on ageism research

These depictions promote the idea that different generations, young children and older adults, engage with the digital world in a completely different manner that is predicated primarily on when they were born. Some research traditions have proposed that young people are “digital natives”, and older adults are “digital immigrants” (Prensky). The assumption is that differences in age are the sole or primary cause of differences in technological aptitude. It assumes that all people born into a particular time period, anywhere, whether it be Canada or Romania, have the same interests, aptitudes, skills, and access to digital resources.

Such thinking disregards not only individual differences but also the histories and the infrastructures put into place that enable or inhibit digital access. While not intentional, these are examples of the subtle workings of digital ageism that also promotes FOA- Fear of Aging. Within these scenarios, the older person is perceived not only as “different from me” but as “the other whom I do not want to be like.” (Manor & Herscovivi). FOA, of Fear of Aging, is detrimental to older adults and to those who will become old. That’s everyone.

Communications technology used by older adults

To be sure, there are digital differences and “digital divides” that correlate with age. This is not the same as making age the sole and primary cause of digital inequities and divides. As researchers associated with the Aging Communications Technology project (ACT) have demonstrated through both international surveys and qualitative methods, older adults do not use the same functionalities on their mobile phones- or smartphones. (actproject.ca).

However, the number of mobile devices used by older adults differs widely from country to country and changes over time for the same people. Access to educational opportunity, connected to social class and access to income, is often a far greater determinant of digital use than age itself. Access to the digital world is connected to barriers encountered because of the cost of the device, the services, access fees, as well as the social supports available to assist one in learning how to use a device- and how to do so safely without fear of identity theft. And here is the point. The reasons that older adults accept, reject, or nuance their engagement with technology are connected to a multitude of factors that influence digital engagement – including personal preferences on how to spend one’s precious time (Lafontaine & Sawchuk).

It is not easy to age in a digital world. It requires work, effort and affordable, accessible services that allow those living on low incomes or watching one's pennies after retirement to participate in this brave new world of ever-changing media where, as one participant recently put it, "it is no longer a luxury but a necessity." Research on the use of digital media by older adults during the COVID pandemic indicates the ability of many older adults to learn and to adapt, if the right conditions are put into place (Khalili-Mahani et al.).

The rise and fall of online platforms, changes in software, new forms of entertainment delivery and essential governmental services mean that citizens are continually required to learn and relearn new systems to participate fully in society. What is critical is to understand the multitude of causes contributing to digital divides and digital ageism. Ending age blaming and shaming and listening to older adults about their actual and changing digital needs and desires is vital if we are to promote a better aging future for all.

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