The role of Social Networks in helping to alleviate loneliness and isolation for senior citizens

An *ActiveAge* Discussion Paper

Loneliness is endemic among older people whose lives are bound by their immediate environment. A recent report by Help the Aged states that more than one million people say they often or always feel lonely[1]. The charity found that more than one third of older people in the UK, including half of women aged over 65, now live alone.

Research suggests that 90% of older people living alone would like to have higher quality relationships. *Age Concern* has called for more help for older people, claiming that many only interact with home delivery people. Over half a million pensioners only leave their home once a week and 48% say the television is their main form of company. A variety of factors are to blame including an absence of opportunities to pursue hobbies, lack of local services and low incomes.

One way in which loneliness could be alleviated is by helping older people to gain skills, which would allow them to communicate with friends and family by virtual means. Learning how to use technology and being able to access it would give senior citizens a wider range of social opportunities, and expand their ability to contribute their knowledge, experience, talent and insight to their community and society as a whole.

Beyond simply learning to use the technology, senior citizens will require support and assurance, to gain confidence for using social networks as a means of communicating. This becomes increasingly important for older people with mobility problems or for those whose friends and family don't live nearby, allowing them to remain part of a social network without necessarily having to leave their home on a daily basis.

It must be emphasized that there is no substitute for face-to-face contact and a virtual social network is not suggested as a replacement or substitute for physical contact. It might be best labelled as being for, *'In between times'*, a place where older people can go to chat to relatives or friends when they are in between visits (if they live far away).

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[1] BBC News, Million Elderly People are Lonely, 31st Oct 2008

Or, maybe it is a place to go to arrange to meet up for coffee or to discuss something that need not be done in person, or if it is too cold or too difficult to get outside on a particular day the older person could still be communicating with others. There could be an additional benefit for the older person in the sharing of information on health related issues.

In suggesting the use of social networks to alleviate loneliness and foster social inclusion for senior citizens, there are serious considerations to be made regarding what an individual is trained to do and what they feel comfortable doing. Once the computer has been accepted as a viable aid for communication, the next step is to feel comfortable and confident with its basic features, before using the technology for more complicated day-to-day social requirements.

Loneliness Definitions/Studies
One of the earliest publications on loneliness was Uber, die Eínsamkeít (Zímmermann, 1785-1786). More recent studies of loneliness started in the 1950's with the publication of '*Loneliness*' by Fromm Reichman (1959). Evidence based research into loneliness was supported by Perlman and Peplau in 1981 who defined loneliness as *"the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relations is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively"*[2].

A definition commonly used in Europe is that:
"Loneliness is a situation experienced by the individual as one where there is an unpleasant or inadmissible lack of (quality of) certain relationships. This includes situations, in which the number of existing relationships is smaller than is considered desirable or admissible, as well as situations where the intimacy one wishes for has not been realized" (De Jong Gierveld, 1987)

From definitions such as the above it seems obvious that loneliness is dependant on the individual who experiences it. It is a subjective feeling. The opposite of loneliness is belongingness or embeddedness. Although there are distinctions between *emotional* and *social* loneliness, for the purpose of this report the above definitions will suffice.

Although often discussed in the same context as loneliness, *social isolation* is different. It concerns an objective description of a situation where there is an absence of relationships with other people. The question here is, to what extent is he or she alone? A person with a small number of meaningful relationships is said to be socially isolated but loneliness is not directly connected to social isolation. Socially isolated people may not be lonely and vice versa.

Health Problems related to Loneliness
Isolation and loneliness are not seen as problems that the government should take responsibility for, but they have a big impact on people's lives.

[2] J. de Jong Gierueld, T. van Tilburg, P. A. Dykstra, Cambridge handbook of personal relationships, Ch 26, Loneliness and Social Isolation (2006)

Individuals reporting loneliness and social isolation have been found to suffer serious health problems as a result of their loneliness:

"Social isolation can be as harmful to your health as smoking or a sedentary lifestyle" John Cacioppo

Isolation and loneliness are a leading factor in the likelihood of an individual suffering depression, which is a major component in ill health and premature death. This impacts on families, communities, the economy and wider society. It seems obvious that, if you want to lead a happy and long life, you need a strong social network. As the old African proverb states, *"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together"*

The knock-on effects of loneliness have severe consequences for the country's health service. Loneliness leads to ill health and an increased cost and resource burden on the health service.

The message seems clear. We need to find solutions to prevent loneliness and isolation and the *ActiveAge* programme want to suggest virtual social networks for older people could provide part of the solution.

Social Exclusion
Another factor contributing to loneliness is social exclusion. Living in a society where there are massive inequalities has led to many people feeling excluded. A 2003 ESRC report defines social exclusion as, *"the elderly missing out on material needs, social relations, civic activities or basic services"*.

There are many reasons why people suffer from social exclusion, which are often assumed to be financial. This is not necessarily the case. The reasons vary and include unemployment, poor self-esteem, living alone. But whatever the reasons they lead to a general lack of participation in society, which could be from a social network perspective, use of services or access to care. Furthermore, social exclusion is related not only to poor physical health but also poor mental health. This is a particular problem for older people and a major cause of loneliness and depression.

Both age and social exclusion influence loneliness rates, which increase as age advances, *"the more excluded a person is, the more the depressive symptoms they experience"*[3]. Involving people in different types of social networks is thought to be one way of preventing social exclusion. The next question we need to ask is whether virtual social networks can do the same.

Additional problems in meeting the social needs of lonely or isolated older people
There are clearly certain factors that make loneliness more of a problem as we age and it seems worth considering what these might be. Research carried out by *Participle* into the problems of loneliness in old age highlight some important points:

[3] Age Concern, Being Socially Excluded and Living Alone in Old Age

- Older people desire the same friendships and intimate relationships we all desire and struggle to maintain. The difference here is that building relations is complicated by bereavement, mobility & sensory impairments, lack of opportunity and for some a lifetime of weak social contacts.
- Existing 'social recreational' services do not build relationships; rather than building connections between individuals, instead they tend to focus on delivering activities to group.
- The social networks of the most isolated people are dominated by institutional relationships, often mistaken for friendships

How can social networks help alleviate loneliness

Positive emotions and social networks have a strong impact on our wellbeing and longevity. The problem arises where people live at a distance from friends and family, making it difficult to keep in touch. In addition, modern working practices make it difficult to socialise with friends who have similar schedules and the solution to loneliness is not straightforward.

There is no substitute for physical face-to-face contact. A computer cannot, after all, reach out and hug you! Although this may not necessarily be true for long as *ActiveAge* is aware of developments in Haptic Technogy at the likes of MIT Media Laboratory[4].

There does not appear to be any substantive research that has been undertaken into the use of virtual social networking to alleviate loneliness, or the positive affect these could have, for an individual unable to participate in social networks of any other type. This might simply be a temporary problem - when someone is ill or unwell or can't get out - or it might just be for 'in-between visits' from friends and family. But there does seem to be strength in the argument that virtual social networks could be of benefit for lonely older people.

Furthermore, *Metcalfe's Law* clearly states the value of any network is proportional to the number of connected users.[5] Therefore, the value for any older person using a social network depends on the number of other older people using the same network.

Problems for older people in using social networks

The Digital Divide

It should be seen as a positive thing for society that people are living longer and senior citizens remain in better health than they did 50 years ago. By 2050, 25% of the EU's population will be over 60. However, one of the major problems facing the ageing population, and identified as a priority to address in Europe, is bridging the digital divide.

In 2005 10% of senior citizens over the age of 65 used the Internet, compared to 68% of those aged 16-24. Society is missing out because a large number of people do not have ICT skills, so can't adapt to the changing work environment etc. In turn, these individuals are missing out on opportunities only possible with ICT skills.

[4] http://www.media.mit.edu/spi/SPIPapers/wjp/IEEE_FINAL.pdf
[5] Wikipedia, Metcalfe's Law http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metcalfe's_law

They are being excluded from the benefits of an Information Society, *"not being able to invest in their own knowledge, skills, growth, prosperity and wellbeing"[6]*.

There is a strong connection between social exclusion and digital exclusion. A *Citizen's Online* report from July 2007 revealed that 75% of people who are socially excluded are also digitally excluded.

According to *Age Concern* nearly half of people (in the UK) over 50, do not have a computer. When they do have web access, the results seem to be quite dramatic with consumers over 65 - who have a network connection - spending 50% more time online per day than the UK average of one hour[7].

Peers not using technology/the Internet
One of the barriers for older people's use of social networks might be the fact that others, their own age, are not using them (see case study). Therefore they don't have a peer group to communicate with. For senior citizens who are using social networks, they generally do so to communicate with their younger relatives and grand children. However, there are ways to solve this problem.

ActiveAge is aware of work that is being done to support networking for older people. For example, a group in Southwark, London, has recently been set up by the social design group, *Participle*[8]. The *Southwark Circle* is a network of groups of several dozen senior citizens living near each other.

Each local circle combines various functions to help senior citizens overcome problems in their homes and has been designed to foster cooperation and socialising. The project is funded by the local authority and receives contributions from the seniors themselves.

This is not a group that exists in the virtual world, but if we were to take the model of a group like this, for older people, it seems feasible that we could introduce to that existing group, the concept of social networking online. By doing this individuals would automatically have peers, they could communicate with via the social network and they would not be limited to younger friends and family etc. They may also be able to support one another or help solve simple problems without having to leave their home and walk to their neighbour's house.

This also answers some of the issues/criticisms of using technology for communication. For example, there is no substitute for face-to-face dialogue, or older people may fear for their safety and security i.e. not knowing the person they are talking to online.

As James Lynch sated in his book *A Cry Unheard: the medical consequences of loneliness*, "Digital images that speak have become confused with the physical presence of human beings in face-to-face dialogue"[9].

[6] P8 Environmental Scanning Report
[7] V. Keegan, 'Connecting Older People to the World', The Guardian
[8] http://www.participle.net/
[9] p25, J. Lynch, A Cry Unheard: The Medical Consequences of Loneliness, (2000)

However, if a social network was to combine the physical and the virtual, we would not be negating the evident value of physical social networks, we would be enhancing these. We would be creating opportunities to socialise that may not otherwise be there for people who can't get out of their homes for various reasons. In addition, the fear for safety and security could be removed by allowing the older people to have met in person.

ActiveAge believe we should be raising awareness for older people of the alternatives, which have been created by technologies such as email, chat rooms, photo sites such as *Flickr.com*, search engines, *Skype* and social networks, *Twitter* or virtual worlds. Whilst viral marketing and communications have undoubtedly helped raise awareness of these for younger people, the same it not true for the older generation.

Poverty

Over 2.1 million pensioners are living in poverty after housing costs are taken into account and the percentage increases with age[10]. In the 60-64 year-old bracket the percentage is 17% whilst in the 85 year plus category this increases to 25%. With figures like this it seems obvious that one problem in getting older people online is the cost of buying a computer and paying for Internet access in the first place.

If we look at other means of funding from local authorities, it could be feasible to set up some sort of scheme, such as that started by the mayor in Miami. Senior citizens received discount vouchers for purchasing a particular PC (*SeniorPC*[11]), if they signed up to computing lessons.

Psychological Barriers

There are psychological barriers to overcome. Many older people have a deep-rooted belief that they are too old or that 'it is not for me'. However, *Ofcom* research has shown that many groups of older consumers would go online if they were given the right kind of support to help overcome their fears. *Ofcom* suggested that courses designed for older people, supported by mentoring schemes, would encourage them to get online.

Although there appear to be psychological barriers for older people using computers to get online, there are other ways we might consider for providing access. As stated in the introduction to this report, older people are using their televisions with 48% saying the television is their main form of company.

Whilst watching the television may be considered a lonely pursuit, connecting a television to the Internet could allow older people to socialise.

It is perfectly feasible for an older person to use their television to browse the net, access social networks, information about their health, or activities in their local area. There seems to be a smaller jump from watching a television, which older people are already familiar with, to getting online.

[10] Age Concern, Older People in the United Kingdom, Key Facts and Statistics, (2008)
[11] *SeniorPC* case study http://www.activeage.org/case-studies.html

Possible Solutions

Providing Technical Assistance

An interesting company *ActiveAge* came across whilst researching the subject of social networks, provides 24-hour technical support for people's businesses and in their homes.

This company is rather aptly known as the *Geek Squad* who began life 14 years ago in the US, with one college student on a bike, a laptop in his bag and $200. The company has since expanded into the UK with the remit of fixing anything that goes wrong with your technology.
As well as working out the problem they want to give homes and businesses a better understanding of the technology they use every day.[12]

BT also runs a volunteering scheme where people with ICT skills provide support that could be utilised for the benefit of senior citizens and their involvement in virtual social networks.

This is the kind of support that would probably encourage older people to use technology. If they knew they could access help on request from a friendly and patient person who wasn't just at the end of the phone.

PC's that come with technical support

SeniorPC is a computer package for senior citizens, which has been designed with an easy to use interface and technical support for the older user. The PC is delivered and installed into the home of the older person, who is also provided with technical support for any difficulties incurred while using the product. A conglomerate of companies came together to provide the *SeniorPC* package.

Training Courses

There is a need for technology training for older people, to make sure more people are included in the digital world, so they can take advantage of all it has to offer. Technology provides a cheaper way of communicating, especially for those whose families have moved away for better career opportunities etc. Organisations such as *Age Concern* offer technology lessons for older people on a pay-as-you-go basis, so it is not necessary to book and pay for a whole block up front.

There are various reasons that have been identified as attracting older people to technology, for example, to research their ancestors. One of the classes *Age Concern Newcastle* provides is specifically tailored for older people who want to use the Internet for genealogy purposes.

Introducing social networks to older people

Send with Peggy

This idea could be seen as a way of introducing older people to social networking, without them having to go online or use a computer. By sending something tangible from a social networking site, to an older person, this will raise awareness and interest.

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[12] http://www.geeksquad.co.uk/misc/misc.aspx?id=242

Peggy was an idea inspired by real life Peggy who finds it difficult to get out of the house these days. She said she really missed the 'buzz', which all her younger family are involved with i.e. keeping in touch on *Facebook* and other social networking sites.

The *Peggy* service was developed as a means of connecting older people with their younger relatives using social networking, in a way that is convenient for them.

The *Peggy* function on *Facebook* allows members of the site to send a postcard from *Facebook* telling someone they are thinking of them. The function allows an individual to type their postcard on *Facebook*, the company will then print this out and send it. Every postcard sent comes with a pre-addressed, pre-stamped reply. It is free to send postcards to anywhere in the UK or Ireland[13].

Niche Networks

The following list includes some of the social networking sites that currently exist, specifically tailored towards senior citizens, and some that are just easy to use, and could be utilised by seniors with little effort or training.

Finerday
Launched in June 2008, a commercial site, supported by *Age Concern*, it enables older people to stay in touch with their families and vice versa. The website allows the whole family to connect, share photos, special dates and memories. It has been designed in a simple way with the intention of making it easy to use for senior citizens who may not have used a computer before.

The site will offer *Skype* and text messaging, gifts, shopping and fun. There will also be an area to invite friends.

Eons.com
An online community for boomers, which specifically targets individuals born between 1946 and 1964. This is a US site.

Saga Zone
This is an online social community, based in the UK, targeted at the over 50's.

Twitter
Twitter is a service for friends, family, and co−workers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one question: What are you doing?

This is a site on computers and mobile phones where you type in a few words about what you are doing at that moment or anything that occurs to you. Others then sign up as "followers" and get access to your 'twitters' (the information you post about what you are doing). This service could be extremely valuable for families, with older relatives, who worry about their wellbeing, that they are safe, eating properly and taking care of themselves.

[13] http://www.sendwithpeggy.com/

thetimesofmylife.com
This site enables older people (and others) to post their memories – in text, audio or video – to be shared and preserved for posterity. The website was designed with easy-to-use features allowing individuals to record first hand accounts of their life. The site allows individuals to control who sees your stories and memories. It is possible to choose select just friends and family or the whole world.
Older people don't just want to be bombarded with insurance advertisements they want an easy-to-use place where they can stay in touch with their extended families[14].

Information Now[15]
This is not a social networking site but it is a website which was designed to address the needs of older people in Newcastle. The site was created in conjunction with older people to provide information for older people, their families and carers, about services available in the local area.

Conclusion

From the research carried out for this discussion paper it seems that by not being online, senior citizens are missing out on many opportunities, including the ability to socialise remotely.

Social exclusion is inextricably linked with digital exclusion. By helping older people to get online and feel comfortable using the technology, it could reasonable be concluded that they could then be encouraged to utilise virtual social networks, and use the Internet for other services, so reducing social exclusion. Furthermore, there may be a role for the television here, specifically with the proposed digital switch over taking place by 2012.

Most older people are familiar with the television, they use it regularly and feel comfortable doing so. There does not appear to be a great jump from using a television for passive entertainment, to using it for surfing the Internet, accessing information about services and social networking.

ActiveAge does not purport that the virtual world should in any way replace the physical but that it could provide a bridge for *'in between times'* when an individual cannot get out and about or has no visitors.

As well as believing in the premise that virtual social networks for older people could help reduce loneliness, *ActiveAge* also believes that these networks could be used as a means of accessing information about health and social care services in their area. This will be of specific importance with the introduction of Individual Care Budgets, as people will require information to help them make choices about the care they need.

A virtual social network for older people could expand to include information and advice about health & social care. This would add another element to the social network, providing a service for the older person, as well as a place to go for socialising.

[14] Keegan, V, 'Net Loss for John McCain'
[15] http://www.informationnow.org.uk/

Next Steps

Following on from this discussion paper *ActiveAge* welcomes feedback from partners on the feasibility of a Social Network demonstrator. The *ActiveAge* team is happy to take the lead in arranging a meeting/discussion between all interested partners to decide how this idea can move forward.

Research into the uptake of technology by older people, and the barriers to this, is currently being undertaken by *ActiveAge*. In addition, and based on a very recent briefing[16] on their Independent Living Platform in Newcastle by Broadband Capital Limited, *ActiveAge* believes it is important to understand the changing use of television within the home and how this might evolve into an important channel for social networking. This is therefore something that the *ActiveAge* team is planning to examine and would welcome feedback from partners who share a similar interest.

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