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REVIEW ESSAY

Social media and senior citizen advocacy: an inclusive tool to resist ageism?

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With population aging, interest groups demand that governments act to prevent a perceived financial crisis. Senior citizens remain frustrated in their efforts to influence the response of policy-makers. In an effort to strengthen their voice, one group of senior citizens, engaged in a participatory action research project, questioned how online social media could be used in their advocacy efforts. This query led to an examination of the literature with the *primary objective* of determining what is known about the use of social media by senior citizens for the purposes of social advocacy. The *outcomes* of the review revealed that very few studies specifically examined this question. Senior citizen online roles were depicted as consumers of health information or socializers with family and friends. Ageist assumptions informed the design of computer hardware, online formats and norms for social engagement. Senior citizens have concerns about the trustworthiness of social networking sites and while social media can exclude senior citizens from public debate, the authors *conclude* that the pressing issue is to focus on age-friendly design and supports. With these in place, social media can provide a venue for senior citizens to challenge ageism and influence public policy discourses.

Keywords: social media; ageism; senior citizenship; advocacy; political activism

Introduction

The questions examined in this paper arose from discussions with a group of senior citizen activists involved in the participatory action research project (PAR), *Exercising Senior Citizenship in an Ageist Society*, under the facilitation of the first author and fourth author. This group of senior citizens (the term "senior citizen" used advisedly to convey seniors as participants in valued social roles who hold the rights and responsibilities of citizens) is actively involved in advocacy work focused on the provision of adequate supportive home services within the province of Ontario, Canada. In their efforts to be heard, the group is exploring the use of social media as a tool and venue to give voice to their message. Early on, one of the senior members and long-time activist (age 93) expressed frustration with the increasing use of online technologies for communication and advocacy work, which she experiences as a form of social exclusion. She lamented that while younger people grew up with this technology, many older adults are left "in a void"

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and at a disadvantage when it comes to navigating online venues. She feels excluded from key policy conversations in a way that she had not been before. Her experience runs counter to a growing perception that online social media are a liberating force and can serve to level the playing field by providing alternative, unrestricted, real-time access to information-sharing formats for marginalized groups. This point of tension serves as a starting point in the PAR process (outlined below) to examine social media and senior citizenship activism. And so we ask, *how can social media be used by a group of senior citizen activists advocating for greater access to supportive home care? what are the barriers they face in its application and how can online social media be modified to support the advocacy needs of older adults?*

To begin to answer this question, a review of the literature was performed using the search terms "social media," "blog," "senior," "senior citizen," "old* adults," "elderly," "ageism," "advocacy," "political activism," and "activism." We searched databases strong in social science rather than health science literature, including Scopus, JSTOR, ProQuest, and Web of Science, because our interests were in the social and political processes of using information and communication technologies for citizen engagement and the social construct of ageism, not in physical aspects of aging or health information seeking behaviors. Google and Google Scholar were also searched to capture gray literature, popular or lay resources, and because they serve as simple, single points of entry to begin a search on a complex topic (Asher, Duke, and Wilson 2013). Finally, we examined citations of the literature discovered in our search, including those of literature reviews by Nef et al. (2013) and Leist (2013). The reviewed literature then formed the basis for the following theoretical discussion on the conceptual links between ageism, senior citizenship, advocacy, and social media.

A caveat is in order here. This paper does not provide a summary of final PAR research findings as the research project is ongoing; rather, it describes an action objective of the PAR group to investigate and better understand how to use online social media for senior advocacy purposes. For this reason, a detailed final list of research themes is not presented. The point of tension expressed by the above participant can be viewed as an initial emergent theme and pressing research question that the group wished to explore further and, distinct from other research methodologies, take action on. A description and rationale on the use of PAR and where this paper is situated within this PAR process are provided below.

Situating this inquiry within the PAR process

The group of older adults engaged in this PAR study have worked together for many years on senior citizenship issues, and thus, represent a rich resource of collective knowledge and experience. Critical gerontologists identify the need to tap into such resources and to engage greater numbers of older adults in research processes and theorizing (Estes, Biggs, and Phillipson 2003; Martinson and Minkler 2006; Minkler and Wallerstein 2008; Peace 2002; Walker 2007). PAR methodologies offer a useful avenue for responding to this need.

PAR is described as, "inquiry with the participation of those affected by an issue for the purpose of education and action for effecting change" (Green et al. 1995, 4). PAR projects have been used to raise public debate on issues and to bring about social change in a manner that is emancipatory and which is particularly relevant to marginalized communities (Creswell 2009; Healy 2001; Trentham and Cockburn 2005). PAR projects often follow a cycle of action, reflection, and modified action based on new learning. Relevant to this study, PAR offers a methodology to better understand exclusionary ageist forces by examining how seniors as citizens can resist, through active civic engagement, social policies, ageism, and norms that create social dependency.

Following a typical PAR process, the participants plan, implement, reflect on, and revise social policy change efforts aimed at enhancing public funding for supportive community services for older adults. This process began in 2010 and continues in an iterative manner.

Documentation of committee processes, outcomes, and reflective notes are used as primary data sources and are organized electronically using a qualitative software package (NVivo). Initial discussion summaries are completed by the primary researcher with subsequent review, discussion and revisions provided by the full participatory research group. Based on these discussions, the PAR members together discuss further learning questions and options for further actions. This paper represents a response to one of the primary research questions, that is, *how can social media be used by a group of senior citizen activists advocating for greater access to supportive home care?*

In addition to examining the literature to further group learning, PAR members are currently in the process of trialing digital storytelling through online venues (e.g., website, Facebook) and the use of social media (e.g., Twitter, media posts). The results of their efforts are to be published at a later date.

Background

As the population ages, demand is put on governments to respond to competing claims in order to avoid, what is often presented as, the social and financial crises of population aging. There are murmurs of intergenerational tensions as a discourse surfaces that pits young and old against each other; younger cohorts question the perceived privileges of retired people while they fight for fewer and fewer entry-level jobs with little anticipation of a financially secure retirement (Duncan 2008). Factors such as inequities in the labor market are not part of such debates.

Demographic projections show that the North American population is indeed aging, as is that of many other countries. In fact, Asian countries such as South Korea and Japan are experiencing this demographic change more precipitously than North America. According to the UN, Europe currently has the oldest population of adults 60 and over; Japan currently has the highest life expectancy at birth (United Nations [UN] 2013; World Health Organization [WHO] 2014), with western Europe, Canada, the USA, and Australia not far behind (Christiansen et al. 2009; Doblhammer, Rau, and Vaupel, 2009). Projections of population aging have been known for decades (cohort change occurs over time). Thus, there is nothing sudden about this phenomenon. A more accurate depicter of events is that of an advancing glacier rather than the *tsunami* metaphor frequently used in public discourse. So, if glacier advance is suddenly seen as threatening, it is important to consider why an aging population poses a crisis now when it was ignored before. Who is sounding the alarm? Who are seen as victims? What kinds of catastrophes are being predicted? For instance, the causal link between an aging population and rising healthcare costs has been repeatedly challenged by research (e.g., Evans et al. 2001; Hollander et al. 2007), but this challenge is routinely ignored since this demographic crisis discourse reappears in a new guise as soon as an old one is discredited (Neysmith 2012, 297).

Attempts to challenge a discourse that reinforces what Clark (2011) refers to as a deficit model of aging are further hobbled, as *private sector players* have much to gain from its continued dominance. For example, private sector entrepreneurs stand to benefit from opportunities to provide service to an increasingly needy and costly cohort of aging "baby-boomers." Fewer services provided through the public purse create vacancies that can be filled by the private sector (Banaszak-Holl et al. 2002; Gleckman 2014; McGregor and Ronald 2011).

In addition to private sector interests in fostering a deficit model of aging, the ageism inherent within this model of aging is further reinforced within home-care policy discussions – the concern of the group under study. The dominant home-care discourse at the international, national, and

local levels would seem to convey a message of escalating consumption of health resources by a growing group of older adults living with chronic illness and disability (Hollander et al. 2007; Walker 2012; WHO and US National Institute on Aging 2011). This depiction of what an aging population means creates a difficult challenge for senior citizens. As the senior citizens in this study have repeatedly observed, absent from this discourse is an alternative narrative of older people as engaged citizens who contribute to the well-being of their communities in numerous yet poorly acknowledged ways (Wiles and Jayasinha 2013). This counter depiction of senior citizens as contributors to their community parallels the reframing of home-care services by disability rights advocates who view home care as a system of community supports that enables full participation of disabled people as citizens and, as such, essential to the creation of inclusive communities (Kelly 2011; Morris 1997). The ageism inherent within the deficit model of aging, long challenged by researchers, makes these contributions invisible.

Clearly, power struggles persist with many voices and agendas competing for the attention of decision-makers. Within this public arena, some voices are heard over others: those with economic clout and greater social capital use the various venues available to lobby and bend the ear of those who matter. At the same time, concern has been expressed by the senior citizens involved in this study about the shrinking number of senior citizens involved in advocacy work. Most of the senior citizen social movement literature was developed in the USA in the early 1990s. There has been little work on seniors' groups as arenas of power since then (however, for a recent review, see Beard and Williamson 2011). With few exceptions (e.g., the AARP), there has been a general failure to sustain the political engagement of older adults across countries. Thus, gerontologists are understandably skeptical of the significance of "senior power" (Carney 2010; Gilleard and Higgs 2009; Hudson 2005; Persson and Berg 2009). Furthermore, despite their political activism, many older Americans become dependent by virtue of age-relations – a system of inequities based on age that privileges the not-old at the expense of the old: the definition of ageism (King and Calasanti 2009).

In the Canadian context, there was a period in the 1980s when seniors did have an activist reputation because of the militant way they opposed proposals for changes in Old Age Security (Gifford 1990). This characterization has largely evaporated since then; this collective approach to social change got lost in the individualistic neo-liberal orientation that marked the late 1990s and which favors free market solutions to social problems. Retirement has been marketed as a period of greater consumption and much-deserved time for individual pursuits. Thus, the press to embrace and interiorize an identity of continued citizenship may be lessening. In addition, "55 and out" may have started with a union push for better retirement benefits, but the image behind the slogan fueled advertisements ranging from retirement living accommodations to private pension policies (in Canada, the best known are Registered Retirement Savings Plans). All of these rest on the assumption that so-called boomers have resources to invest. Such privileged circumstances define a very limited sector of the population (Freeman 2012).

Despite the fact that seniors have high voting rates, they by no means vote as a single block. An apparent contradiction is that while there is growing awareness of the increasing numbers, good health and financial resources of post-World War II boomers, senior advocacy groups seem to have very little power to influence the policy agenda (Gilleard and Higgs 2009) and to counter ageist myths promulgated by those who stand to gain much from them. In trying to understand the dynamics of ageism, it warrants noting that the politics of diversity for the most part has not included an analysis of ageism (Biggs et al. 2006). For instance, important insights from feminist theory and social action within the Women's Movement have reflected the interests of younger people. This may be changing as feminists age, but inequities stemming from disparities rooted in class, race, and sexual orientation will need to inform both analysis and advocacy. Furthermore, any analysis of ageism will need to factor in the denial/fear of death that marks western

society. These are some of the dimensions of ageism that are under discussion by the PAR group participants informing this paper. Naming, resisting, and reframing ageist depictions and storylines of older persons are vitally important to changing the dominant discourse that dis-empowers senior citizens.

Senior citizens resisting ageism through social media

Resisting ageism is not a simple task. Despite their growing numbers, people older than 60 commonly experience social and cultural invisibility, a dynamic sometimes captured by the phrase "social exclusion" (Aronson and Neysmith 2001). It is not that older people lack the physical, mental, and material resources to be socially included; rather, it is marginalization by the state, culture, and market that constitutes the social injustice (Gilleard and Higgs 2009, 291).

Members of the seniors' group whose reflections inform this paper have begun to ask themselves, where and how does ageism present itself, and how can they name ageism when it is experienced; resist it; and reframe it. Though it is easier to name ageism when it happens at the micro level – most obviously in the interactions between healthcare provider and senior citizen client, where the limiting attitudes and patronizing communications of providers is readily apparent – it is more difficult to "out" ageism at the political level, where the paternalistic values and limiting subtexts are more implicit and not immediately evident without a focused analysis. As a result, many senior citizens, including those involved in the current PAR study, feel left out of the policy conversation, experiencing firsthand the impact of ageist structures and attitudes that limit their participation in citizenship roles: particularly irritating is being shut out of influencing policy debates that affect the quality of their lives. For instance, PAR participants have frequently been asked to serve on advisory panels only to learn that the major directions are non-negotiable and "advice" is needed around emphasis or implementation strategy. Study participants, currently more engaged in traditional advocacy forums (e.g., public panels, electoral town halls, and advocacy flyers), have discussed the increasing use of online social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook for political debate and information sharing. In their efforts to squeeze into the policy debate on supportive home services, participants in this study recognized the need to become literate with alternative methods of engaging in political discussion, through online social media platforms. Historians remind us that various forms of social media have been part of human society for centuries (e.g., seventeenth-century coffee houses (Standage 2013)) and propose the more accurate term of online social media. However, for brevity, the online nature of social media and social networking is assumed in this paper in the choice of the term, social media.

As with traditional forms of media, digital content on websites can reach diffuse and diverse audiences. What sets social media apart from radio, television, and even static websites is that audiences are invited to engage with content producers and one another – and indeed to generate their own content – rather than remain passive recipients of information. It is this ability to engage that makes these media "social." Social media take many forms, from social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook or Twitter, to content-sharing (YouTube), collaborative (Wikipedia), and journalistic or diary-like (weblog, or "blog") platforms, to virtual worlds and gaming environments (Kaplan and Haenlein 2012). The distinctions become further blurred as users "cross-post" (post the same content across different social media) or embed links within one platform to another. Though much has been written about the use of social media by senior citizens to maintain social connections with family and friends (e.g., Facebook, Skype, and email) (see, e.g., Braun 2013; Dewing 2010; Doyle and Goldingay 2012; Martyn and Gallant 2012), little is known about seniors citizens' use of social media in advocacy work. Persson and Berg (2009) emphasize the importance of voice channels for influencing the

decision-making process. Social media employed to support fluid channels of communication are such voice channels.

Social media: inclusive tools for change?

SNSs, and social media in general, are similar to other types of public meeting sites. As boyd (2011, 39) puts it, "they allow people to gather for social, cultural, and civic purposes and they help people connect with a world beyond their close friends and family." Sometimes referred to as networked publics, boyd continues, these sites share much in common with other types of publics; however, the technological structures and affordances inherent to social media shape users' engagement with them in different ways. This section looks at what we know about how senior citizens engage with social media generally, followed by an examination of how social media are used by senior citizen advocates, what types of social media are not used, and why or why not. We conclude by considering how social media technologies might be modified to better engage senior citizens in advocacy work.

The growing use of social media as a community building, and in some cases advocacy, tool by many marginalized groups in society would seem to support the claim that social networking through social media is a great equalizer. For example, disabled people have found social networking platforms to be liberating in the absence of physical and visual barriers experienced in other public venues (Guo, Briscout, and Huang 2005; Seymour and Lupton 2004). However, the idea that online engagement actually produces positive "offline" outcomes in terms of activism, civic engagement, or political engagement, in any age bracket, is still being debated in the academic literature (Bennett, Wells, and Freelon 2011; Christiansen 2011; Conroy, Feezell, and Guerrero 2012; Obar, Zube, and Lampe 2012; Olorunnisola and Martin 2013). There appears, however, to be a correlation between online political engagement and offline political engagement among adults, thus countering the assumption that online political activity replaces offline political activity. In fact, they seem to represent complementary efforts (Smith 2013). As well, Conroy, Feezell, and Guerrero (2012) suggest that online groups may produce similar effects as offline groups in fostering political engagement. This debate notwithstanding, the *idea* that social media can produce positive social outcomes is promoted. For example, Global Voices Online (2008) prints an Advocacy 2.0 Guide that describes techniques for digital activists to incite change through blogs, Twitter, and other forms of social media. As well, websites such as *avaaz.org* and *change.org* aim to facilitate political organizing and lobbying for various causes using survey and petitioning tools to be shared online. Overall, the literature suggests that positive outcomes are possible, but not inherent, and they do not necessarily have a "strong effect" (Christiansen 2011), nor is it clear why certain campaigns fail and others succeed (Jones 2013).

Despite gaps in research, it is clear that the older adult age bracket in Canada and the USA are the fastest growing social media adopters (Smith 2014). However, it remains unclear how seniors use social media to organize and advocate politically. It is known that fewer older adults are on the Internet than younger people: ~45% of Canadians aged 65–74 use the Internet, and only 21% aged 75 and older do so (Dewing 2010). One must read these statistics with caution, however, as it is most likely that there may be significant cohort differences with Internet use between people from 75 to 80 and those over 80. It is highly questionable to assert that 21% of 80- to 100-year-olds are online users. As for social media use, only 4% of adults aged 65 and over "blog;" however, 44% age 55 and older have online profiles. There are only a few documented examples of older adults using social media tools such as blogs for advocacy activities. The web-based "Ageless Project," available at http://jenett.org/ageless/, lists bloggers by age and confirms that not many older adults are bloggers, and of those who do use blogs, very few use them

for advocacy purposes. Parra, D'Andrea, and Giacomin (2012) describe a PAR project using blogging by older adults. While the blog was not used for advocacy, they discuss the potential benefits of blogs for collaborative work among older adults. Waycott et al. (2013) similarly found that older adults embrace the opportunity to express creativity collaboratively through digital content when given the opportunity. Generally, according to the literature, senior citizens use the Internet mainly for information seeking, with a growing number using it for social networking (Martyn and Gallant 2012; Waycott et al. 2013).

How do social media produce and reproduce ageism?

"Social media complicate what it means to be public" (Baym and boyd 2012, 320). As Baym and boyd claim, socially mediated public life is shaped not only by the design of these media, but also by the social fabric of people's lives. While the use of technology to interact with various publics is not a new phenomenon, the democratization of access to social media technologies affords a greater number of users, and a multi-directionality of interaction and engagement within and across unknown and diverse audiences. Social media requires users to re-conceptualize their relationships with changing technologies and audiences, and to adapt to fluid social boundaries and their own shifting identities as creator and consumer of content. Sawchuk (2013), based on case-study research examining how diverse groups of seniors take up social media, believes that the pressure to use digital technologies in order to maintain connections in current Canadian culture – a process she refers to as "mediatization" – reflects a neo-liberal agenda that privileges educated social elites. Despite this, Sawchuck advocates the necessity for seniors to take up and "appropriate" such technologies as a tactic to engage politically.

For senior citizens, there are additional factors that further complicate the ways in which they do or do not navigate social media, such as social segregation, ageism, and technological and financial access. The decline in use of, or difference in access to, information and communication technologies is known as the "digital divide," and increased age is considered an important factor in increasing this divide (Abbey and Hyde 2009). Nef et al. (2013) point out that defining old age is difficult because age classifications differ culturally and historically. However, in Canada and the USA, there appears to be a dramatic drop in Internet use among adults beyond 75 years old, even as usage among adults over 65 years continues to increase (Smith 2014; Statistics Canada 2011, 2013; Zickuhr and Madden 2012). This decrease has been credited to lower income and decreased access to broadband service among adults 75 years and older, in addition to attitudes surrounding its utility and privacy, difficulty learning the technologies, and physical and/or cognitive impediments (Lee, Chen, and Hewitt 2011; Leist 2013). Usage of social media follows this trend (Dewing 2010). Social segregation of age cohorts leads to age-based stereotyping (Hagstad and Uhlenberg 2005). A common stereotype held of older adults is of the "doddering but dear" (Cuddy and Fiske 2002). Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick (2002) propose that the warm but incompetent stereotype conveys the impression of non-competitiveness, ranking the aged person as low status. Low-status persons become invisible. Not seen, invisible people are also not heard. Adding to this invisibility is the increasing use of social media with their changing norms for social dialogue and debate. Not surprisingly, social media are developed and designed by younger cohorts with their peers in mind as the final users. The unique needs of older people, if considered at all, are an afterthought. Ideally, as the technology matures and innovations are introduced, the user base also matures and vice versa in a reciprocal, mutual fashion. Unfortunately, according to Baker et al. (2013) and in keeping with the ageist stereotypes discussed above, the perception of older adults as "computer or web illiterates" imposes a barrier to their full participation in developing suitable platforms, friendly to this user group. While it is true that some age-related conditions may present challenges for older adults participating in online forums (e.g., arthritis, changes

with vision), it is easy to fall into the belief that because of cognitive, sensory, or physical age-related changes, lack of online participation is a result of individual failings. It is, therefore, important to recognize for whom these technologies are designed, and for whom these are not. Importantly, economic and regional barriers to social media use still exist, particularly for low-income rural older adults (Chou, Lai, and Liu 2010; Doyle and Goldingay 2012; Stellefson et al. 2013). These systemic barriers perpetuate difficulties because the less one participates on the web, the less one is able to participate in the development process of websites (Baker et al. 2013). As well, online social media, much like conventional networking venues, are products of ageist societies and are equally likely to perpetuate negative stereotypes and ageist beliefs through their content (Levy et al. 2014); the lack of engagement by senior citizens in content development allows these ideas to go unchallenged. Olphert and Damodaran (2013) suggest a fourth digital divide: even if seniors have access, know-how, and motivation, they simply stop using the Internet, or become "digitally disengaged." It is important not to pass this off solely as a cohort effect. Even with the likelihood of future older adult cohorts using social media more frequently, the realities of living within an ageist society will most likely limit to what extent this demographic shift will adequately create more senior-friendly formats. As Tatsou (2011) states, digital divides evolve through complex interactions between socio-political systems and individual attitudes, abilities, and motivations.

While much has been written about the potential barriers faced by this population as well as the unique design features that should be considered when developing web spaces and online formats (Moore 2005), a greater proportion of these discussions have been concerned with the development of online *health* communities (Moore 2005) or *learning* communities (Snyder 2002), where the focus is on knowledge transfer of health care and chronic disability information. As primarily knowledge translation venues, they are less informative about how older adults engage politically. This observation itself reinforces the notion of senior citizens as primarily passive targets for health intervention services and not as contributors to society, and certainly not as political activists.

Engaging senior citizens through creating inclusive online environments

While the literature suggests that the impact of social media can and has been experienced as exclusionary, an experience shared by the participants in this study, this paper serves as an extension of the group's actions to explore ways to appropriate the master's tools. It is doubtful that the predominance of social media venues for social discourse is going to disappear, but how can it be harnessed and its ageist limitations named and challenged? The following section represents this change effort and while not denying the exclusionary underlying structures of much social media, consistent with the change focus of PAR, it represents the next step in the PAR process.

Despite the mechanisms through which social media formats such as blogs can serve to exclude and, in some cases, reinforce ageist stereotypes, it stands to reason that online venues have the potential to be inclusive for senior citizens. Limitations related to mobility, inaccessible public transportation, and age-unfriendly physical public spaces can be overcome through the use of social media technologies, though admittedly users may remain physically isolated. This physical isolation may limit the face-to-face social interaction that is seen, at least as members of the PAR group reveal, as a motivating force and tonic for creative problem solving. However, the invisibility offered with social media may also provide a space for senior citizens to share their ideas freely without being dismissed due to ageist responses to their visible aging. Arguably, this might benefit individuals at the expense of greater visibility for senior citizens collectively. Regardless, social media can serve as an equalizer and provide a space for senior citizens to

engage with younger generations in a way that geographical segregation of generations does not afford.

Online technology also offers more flexibility in how senior citizens can participate, where public forums can be accessed on demand and at a time convenient to the user. For many senior citizens who live with unpredictable and intermittent chronic disability and illness, attending scheduled events is not always possible. For these reasons, social media can ideally provide senior citizens with an alternative venue for ongoing citizenship. The question remains: Is there more that can be done to engage and include senior citizens in social media use for political advocacy purposes?

Based on surveys of 124 adults between 60 and 90 years old who use the Internet, Braun (2013) developed a number of suggestions for engaging more senior citizens in a SNS: assist participants to experience a particular site; help them address any barriers they may have to accessing the site; provide access to proper computer equipment; convey the usefulness and relative safety of the particular SNS; and outline the socio-emotional benefits of engaging online with others. Of these, creating trustworthiness in social media sites in light of privacy fears seems to be a particular challenge. Time and effort must be made up front through training sessions to set up privacy options, in order to instill confidence and alleviate the need to make ongoing privacy control changes.

Though a growing number of computer literacy and social media workshops exist that are directed at senior citizens, researchers, and practitioners (Cyber-Seniors, personal communication), and from the experience of the group of seniors involved in this PAR study, without ongoing individual coaching support, it is unlikely that seniors will maintain their engagement in social media sites. One project, Cyber-Seniors—a collaboration between a filmmaker, high school students and numerous senior organizations—has resulted in a North America-wide initiative that matches teenage computer coaches with senior citizens. This initiative has been captured in a highly publicized documentary (Cyber Seniors Documentary 2012) and it provides a useful model.

Researchers have made some progress in identifying features of peripheral hardware that offsets challenges related to changes in vision, fine-motor abilities, and lack of familiarity with computer technology, which may enable senior citizens to engage with social media. There seems to be some indication that while the use of tablets (e.g., iPads) remains low for older people (1% of those older than 65), in part thought to reflect socioeconomic status (Zickuhr 2011), the use of a touch screen and absence of a mouse seems to accommodate the fine-motor and eye-hand-coordination patterns of older adults (Jochems, Vetter, and Schlick 2013). As a diverse group, however, older adults' abilities and age-related changes that impact performance vary widely, and so no one device can be expected to meet the needs of all senior citizens. Recently, designers have also created computer desktops with fewer visual distractions and where the choice demands are minimal. Uncluttered desktops with large icons which clearly direct the user to the most often used functions and which require fewer steps to implement an action also seem to make a difference (see, e.g., http://www.telikin.com).

Caution is required when leaping to assumptions that it is web design and online skills alone that limit the online participation of senior citizens. A case study using both quantitative and qualitative methods by Harambam, Aupers, and Houtman (2013) suggests that socioeconomic status and skills are less a factor in the take up of social media tools than is culture, specifically, age-related cultural beliefs regarding social interaction. So, how people feel and think about this technology in social life is of major importance. Similarly, Braun's study (2013) described above on attitudes toward social media found that their perceived usefulness and trustworthiness had more to do with usage than ease of use or social pressures to participate online: a finding shared by others who found that privacy concerns and perceived usefulness were a major

barrier for online engagement by senior citizens (Chou, Lai, and Liu 2010; Doyle and Goldingay 2012; Righi, Sayago, and Blat 2012; Xie et al. 2012). These findings echo comments made by participants in our study who questioned the relevance of using social media forums such as Facebook and Twitter for political aims when their perception of such forums was as vehicles to convey superficial information, such as "what I had for lunch today." Interestingly, from an historical perspective, whenever there has been a shift in the nature of social networking venues, many resist such moves with claims of time wasted on trivial matters (Standage 2013). Thus, the social benefits of such shifts are not so readily apparent. This said, however, the manner in which younger people engage online, with their unique social-media-speak, novel and not easily apparent norms for textual communication, and a seeming comfort with or disregard of potential privacy concerns may be foreign and anxiety producing for many senior citizens. A remaining task, then, is to demonstrate how such technologies are relevant and can be used effectively or modified to bring about social change by senior citizens.

Conclusion

While there is a growing amount of literature and research on the engagement of senior citizens with social media, the majority of this literature focuses on the use of SNSs such as Facebook by senior citizens for the purposes of engaging socially with family and friends. A significant amount also focuses on the use of social media to gather information, most specifically health information. Arguably, this focus reinforces ageist assumptions of senior citizens, viewing them solely as consumers of information about domestic issues or health concerns. Less visible are research questions that consider senior citizens as having broader community concerns and, as demonstrated by the group of senior citizens in this PAR project, as engaged, politically active advocates.

Despite the many hurdles to using social media to counter ageist policies and to voice senior citizens' concerns regarding important policy decisions, it is clear that advocacy and lobbying voice channels are changing. To be part of policy conversations requires online participation. While this shift may in fact reflect a neo-liberal agenda and can limit the participation of less educated and affluent members of society, it nevertheless remains a tool for resistance. This paper provides some thoughts on how the use of social media can maintain exclusion of senior citizens from policy debates, and summarizes research that provides suggestions for making it more inclusive. In future, inclusive design of online technology, additional hardware and software supports, and training workshops need to be kept in mind in order to engage and support the ongoing participation of senior citizens in the online political environment. Foremost among these suggestions is the need to address the relevance of social media and to ensure its trustworthiness to maintain privacy. These two issues may need to be addressed before the technical and arguably more easily overcome barriers to participation are dealt with.

This theoretical discussion paper had its genesis in the questions raised by members of the PAR group, *Exercising Senior Citizenship in an Ageist Society*. This senior citizen advocacy group is currently undergoing a transition to online forms of social participation to voice their concerns and to engage other senior citizens in advocacy work. They have recently initiated the development of a blog (see carewatch.tumblr.com) to engage senior citizens in a conversation about ageism and its impacts on the provision of equitable home support services for senior citizens. In doing so, it has become clear that more training is needed for senior advocates to feel comfortable with this form of social media. Lessons gleaned from this paper's response to their questions about social media and political advocacy will not only be used to develop the conceptual thinking behind their advocacy efforts, but can serve to inform other seniors' advocacy groups and their supporters as they begin to engage within the somewhat feared and unexplored territory of social media.

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