

Chapter 12

“Lose Your Time in a Useful Way”: Digital Inclusion of the Elderly at a Pensioners’ Club in Romania

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ABSTRACT

This chapter looks at the experiences older adults have using computers and the Internet in the context of one e-inclusion effort in Romania. Biblionet – Global Libraries Romania is a project that provides computers to public libraries throughout that country. One of Biblionet’s first public access computer centers located outside of a public library opened at a pensioners’ club in the city of Zalau. Local librarians who have taken Biblionet-sponsored “train the trainer” courses have adapted instructional methods for older users. Ethnographic research at the pensioners’ club has uncovered a variety of experiences around new technology, especially in how computer use is both informed by and extended kin or family work. The project is discussed in the context of NGO-led development initiatives to illustrate the importance of including the wider ICT development landscape (and methods) when studying users, ICTs, and information use.

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INTRODUCTION

Biblionet – Global Libraries Romania is a project that provides computers to public libraries throughout that country. Funded by The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and local Romanian governments and implemented by the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), Biblionet works with local communities to create public access computer centers (PACs) in public libraries and at other community sites. Biblionet is an outgrowth of Gates Foundation work in US public libraries as much as it is a response to Romania’s e-inclusion and information society policy and development efforts, many of which Romania was required to adopt in preparation for EU membership in 2007 (Klimaszewski & Nyce, 2009). These policies focus on increasing access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) for the underserved. In Romania as in other countries, senior citizens comprise a large part of this population and they are often targets of “active ageing” initiatives that includes ICT access (Ianculescu, 2011).

A pensioners’ club (the club) in Zalau, Romania was one of Biblionet’s first four pilot sites. The partnership came about because the club already housed a small branch of the public library and because the club was interested in offering technology-related services to its members. Local librarians who had participated in Biblionet-sponsored ICT trainings adapted training courses for pensioners. The first part of this chapter presents the findings of ethnographic research undertaken at the pensioners’ club. This research investigates the attitudes and experiences of a small group of pensioners and provides a detailed discussion of the training program for seniors. One of the more notable findings was in how computer use was informed by and extended certain kinds of traditional family work or kin work--work that in Romania is most often done by women.

The success of Biblionet at the pensioners’ club was widely celebrated by the project leaders, and for good reason. Researchers found older adults at the club using ICTs that allowed them to, as one user described it, “Lose (their) time in a useful way.” However, user experience tells only part of the story. Programs like Biblionet develop as part of larger global ICT access initiatives, in this case one funded by a prestigious, big-name American foundation. This means that the prospects for name recognition and additional funding become an integral part of the project. Therefore, the chapter concludes with a discussion of how these forces can shape development efforts.

BACKGROUND

Older adults have consistently found themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide (McMurtrey, McGaughey, Downey, & Zeltmann, 2010; Morris, Goodman, & Brading, 2007; Wicks, 2003). For this reason, they are the target of many public policy e-inclusion efforts (Gilhooly, Gilhooly, & Jones, 2008; McClean, 2011). They are also the subject of numerous studies on ICT use (and non-use) across disciplines (Dickinson & Gregor, 2006; McMurtrey et al., 2010; Tobias, 1987; Wagner, Hassanein, & Head, 2010). This section will provide a brief introduction to some of the e-inclusion and related policy efforts targeting older users. It will also give a general picture of the trends in and problems with the literature on this user group. It will conclude by discussing the specific problems and issues facing Romania both in terms of older users and e-inclusion policy.

Though studies on older users and ICTs are numerous, they are often problematic in a number of ways. First and foremost, there is a tendency to characterize “the aged” or “the elderly” or “senior citizens” (even in this paper) as a homogenous group when, in fact, differences within this user

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