Ageing Oz baulks at the Net

Failing eyesight and arthritic fingers are among the greatest hindrances to accessing the emerging information superhighway for Australia's growing population of people aged over 55.

This is one of the key findings of recent research into older Australians' attitudes to the new media conducted at the Communications Law Centre's Melbourne office

A series of forums, which brought together individuals and groups representing older people, found that failing eyesight in older people made it almost impossible to read computer screens and automatic teller machine screens while finding the right keys on a remote control key-pad for people with arthritic fingers was equally debilitating. Another concern was that the shift from free TV to pay TV would reduce the quality of information and services available to older people on low incomes.

With one fifth of the Australian population now aged over 55 and the number expected to increase sharply by the year 2000 and beyond, these issues are of growing concern.

Participants in the forums discussed the confusion experienced at the jargon from sales people. But a number of participants found that when they accessed the technology it was not nearly as mystifying as they first believed .

Older people are hopeful that once the fog of media hype lifts, they will find responsive, practical, inexpensive, user friendly technology which will enrich their lives.

They do not want to be marginalised and they recognise the potential for technologies to maintain connections when their mobility diminishes.

Added to this are the positive effects on their well-being and self image through improved communication and interaction with family members and society in general.

Surveys of older people attending introductory computer courses show that not only do they want to keep mentally active and learn new skills, they also believe this knowledge will keep them in touch with their children and grandchildren. Electronic mail and video phones might help to conquer the tyranny of distance separating many Australian families.

The current cable roll-out that will provide such broadband services as home shopping, banking, medical supervision and employment, is being marketed on the basis of entertainment. As a result, the media and advertising focus is directed at the relatively small section of the Australian urban population with the money and the appetite for more entertainment.

It is in the interests of market forces to cater for this demographic group, but what about the information society as a whole? Should government do what the market won't do?

In the course of its research, the CLC found the level of awareness in older people of the new information technologies to be low. Most of the groups representing older people took the IT terms to mean primarily telephones followed by computers and then videos.

Few people were familiar with the term 'Internet' and in general, people did not have a sense of the capacity of the 'information superhighway'. Certainly, it is difficult to create a concrete image of the future from the glib terms which describe and surround such concepts as 'interactive media' and 'multimedia'.

Access to equipment and training to use the equipment is needed. While a lot of older people are keen to learn new computer skills, this requires incremental learning and is more successful if conducted by peers.

Studies have suggested that older people are initially reluctant to use new technologies, but are more likely to use them if they are directly relevant to their lives and if older people are involved in imparting necessary user skills.

Cost was regarded as a major barrier to older people's access to technological hardware and to classes to obtain skills.

If cost is a barrier, choice to participate in the benefits of the new information age is an illusion. This is exacerbated by increasing pressures on service providers to fund the setting up of new delivery infrastructures such as cable, by revenue raising activities such as video-on-demand. While the primary cable network will be laid by Telstra, the prospect of the introduction of increased competition after 1997, and the ongoing pressures to privatise or partially privatise Telstra, mean that affordable access to the communications network by older people needs to be closely monitored and guaranteed.

Older people who have participated in computer training courses specifically tailored to their needs have found the experience mentally stimulating, demystifying of fears and misconceptions, and generally empowering.

The CLC research suggests that soon, all citizens may need to have a certain level of access to new technology in order to fully participate in social, political and cultural life in the information age. The opportunities for older people to be an important part of this future must be grasped and cemented now. ❑

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