Missed opportunities? A digital divide perspective on age-related differences in the use of mobile communications

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Background

In Switzerland as in many other industrialized countries, the number of mobile telephone contracts is higher than the number of inhabitants (swissinfo 2007). However, social groups differ strongly with regard to their access and use of modern Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) such as mobile communication by cell phones: only 56% of the older generation (ages 60-84) has access to a mobile telephone, compared to an average access rate of 80% in the overall population (ages 15-84) (M.I.S. Trend 2007: 16). Such differences are discussed under the heading of the "Digitial Divide" and seen as problematic from a normative point of view. If the access to ICT is associated with a number of social, cultural and economic opportunities, such a Digital Divide has to be considered as excluding specific social groups, e.g. low education and low income groups, women, older people; from valuable goods and services. Many studies have investigated the digital divide in respect of the Internet (Norris 2003; Stevenson 2009), but very little is known about the digital divide related to Mobile Communications (MC).

Objectives and research questions

This project will focus on the digital divide between age groups. Knowing that young people are, in general, highly intensive users of MC, the focus is on middle-aged and elderly people (the methodical approach is described below).

Research questions and methods: 1) What are the age-specific opportunities and threats in the use of mobile communications? There is some discussion of these questions in theoretical literature: middle-aged persons benefit from the use of information and communication resources independent of space, but the loss of life-work balance due to ubiquitous access and the potential loss of privacy must be considered as threats. Opportunities of MC for the older generation are emergency communication, and the possibility to maintain personal relationships with remote family member and friends. Threats for

the older generation are the low user-friendliness of hardware and software. It is an open question whether these theoretical considerations match with the empirical data.

2) What are the economic, cultural and social effects of low-usage or non-use of mobile communications? Are one or several age groups missing relevant opportunities due to non-use of mobile communication technologies, or, to the contrary, are the non-users avoiding certain threats associated with their use?

3) To what extent are the effects of the different types of use problematic from a normative point of view because they are breaking social norms e.g. equal opportunities, privacy? To what extent are these effects simply to be judged as unproblematic consequences of different user preferences, resulting in different consumption patterns?

Methods

There is only very little research literature (Döring 2008) and to our knowledge no quantitative studies that are addressing these questions. Therefore, this project will rely on a qualitative approach that is better suited to explore such a new field of research. The main aim of the project is to develop new hypothesis and theories, rather than testing given ones.

Focus groups, namely small discussion groups led by a professional moderator, are a qualitative technique of data-gathering that will be used in this project. In order to get an in-depth view of the participant's views questions are asked in an open manner. The debates are recorded, transcribed and analysed by the research team. Groups are composed in a homogenous way (bringing participants together that are similar with regard to one or several key criteria) in order to ease discussions. In this study, three criteria will be combined with the following categories: Age (middle-aged (35-45 years) vs. old (65-75 years); MC-use: high (daily) vs. low (less than weekly); Gender: male vs. female). The combination of all sub-groups in these categories results in a total of 8 homogenous focus groups.

The project is structured into 3 phases of 6 months each:

Phase 1: Desk research (review of international literature) and some 6 expert interviews with stakeholders (representatives of elderly person's organizations, telecommunication companies, privacy experts, etc.). Output: identification of the key opportunities and threats for the elderly.

Phase 2: Eight focus groups (qualitative group discussions) comprised of high and low intensity users within two age groups in respect of opportunities and threats. Output: normative evaluation of the key opportunities and threats from the research participants' perspective.

Phase 3: Publication and implementation of the results. Project findings will be presented at international conferences and discussed with the stakeholders of phase 1 at a workshop.

Expected results

The findings of this project will firstly be of scientific relevance: new hypothesis will be developed which can be investigated in follow-up projects. In addition, it is plausible that some insights from the age-

related digital divide can be transferred to other areas, e.g. education. Secondly, the results will also be of societal importance because they may indicate problematic zones of low technology diffusion or educational barriers hindering an intensive use of MC. The project provides scientific data for the discussion of the relevant normative questions. Due to the integration of stakeholders in the project, the needs and form of targeted solutions, e.g. age-specific hardware and software, education and training, online services, etc., can be assessed.

Literature

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Only 56% of the older generation (age 60-84) has access to a mobile phone (Source: M.I.S. Trend 2007: 16: Source of the image: © REB Images/Blend Images/Corbis